

TIMOTHY HERRING SERIES

SHADES *of* DARKNESS



GLADYS
MITCHELL

writing as

MALCOLM TORRIE

SHADES OF DARKNESS

Titles by Gladys Mitchell

Speedy Death (1929)
The Mystery of a Butcher's Shop (1929)
The Longer Bodies (1930)
The Saltmarsh Murders (1932)
Death at the Opera (1934)
The Devil at Saxon Wall (1935)
Dead Men's Morris (1936)
Come Away, Death (1937)
St. Peter's Finger (1938)
Printer's Error (1939)
Brazen Tongue (1940)
Hangman's Curfew (1941)
When Last I Died (1941)
Laurels Are Poison (1942)
Sunset over Soho (1943)
The Worsed Viper (1943)
My Father Sleeps (1944)
The Rising of the Moon (1945)
Here Comes a Chopper (1946)
Death and the Maiden (1947)
The Dancing Druids (1948)
Tom Brown's Body (1949)
Groaning Spinney (1950)
The Devil's Elbow (1951)
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Merlin's Furlong (1953)
Faintley Speaking (1954)
On Your Marks (1954)
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Twelve Horses and the Hangman's Noose (1956)
The Twenty-Third Man (1957)
Spotted Hemlock (1958)
The Man Who Grew Tomatoes (1959)
Say It With Flowers (1960)
The Nodding Canaries (1961)
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The Croaking Raven (1966)
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Dance to Your Daddy (1969)
Gory Dew (1970)
Lament for Leto (1971)
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A Javelin for Jonah (1974)
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Late, Late in the Evening (1976)
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Nest of Vipers (1979)
The Mudflats of the Dead (1979)
Uncoffin'd Clay (1980)
The Whispering Knights (1980)
The Death-Cap Dancers (1981)
Lovers Make Moan (1981)
Here Lies Gloria Mundy (1982)
Death of a Burrowing Mole (1982)
The Greenstone Griffins (1983)
Cold, Lone, and Still (1983)

No Winding Sheet (1984)
The Crozier Pharaohs (1984)

Gladys Mitchell writing as Malcolm Torrie

Heavy as Lead (1966)

Late and Cold (1967)

Your Secret Friend (1968)

Shades of Darkness (1970)

Bismarck Herrings (1971)

SHADES OF DARKNESS

GLADYS MITCHELL WRITING
AS MALCOLM TORRIE

 THOMAS & MERCER

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To K and F
Gunn, Tyte, Rene, and Mike, 1919-21
et ad infinitum

“We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.”

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CHAPTER ONE

The Unspeakable Miles

“Truly, Filch, thy Observation is right. We and the Surgeons are more beholden to Women than all the Professions besides.”

John Gay—*The Beggar’s Opera*

Alison rested her shining, smooth, dark head against the back of a Hepplewhite chair and studied her handsome husband. She had finished her breakfast, but Timothy sat with a cup of coffee arrested halfway to his mouth as he turned once again to the beginning of the letter he had been reading.

“That’s the third time,” she said. “Tell me the worst. Have all your shares crashed? Have we to do a moonlight flit to get away from our creditors? Am I to take the hat round while you play kerbstone laments on an old trombone?”

“Worse than all that.” Timothy handed her the letter and finished his coffee. “It’s a commission for Phisbe from the unspeakable Mrs. Miles.”

“I thought she’d gone to live on one of the Isles of Scilly. Don’t I remember her being fey and fanciful and all pre-Raphaelite on the subject of Lyonesse?”

“I’m sure you do, and I did hope and pray we’d seen the last of her, but here she is, as bright and bobbish as ever,

full of sound and fury, and, probably, if she runs true to form, signifying nothing."

"Shall you see this man she's sending along?" Alison, having skimmed through the letter, laid it aside.

"Just long enough to say, 'Not today, thank you,' and shut the door in his face. Is there any more coffee in that pot?"

"Would you like to be technically 'out' when he calls, and leave me to get rid of him?" asked Alison, refilling the cup he passed to her.

"No. I'm dashed if I'm going to land you with my dirty jobs. Besides, I've never interviewed the representative of a film company, and I'm always prepared to try anything once. What a gorgeous name he's got, too—Glanvilliers Ryanston. Let's have a small bet on what he'll be like."

"The field's rather wide, isn't it?"

"Let's narrow it down, if you're prepared for a bit of a flutter. I know there must be dozens of film-producer types, so suppose we concentrate on four? That would give us two chances each at five bob a time. What do you say?"

"I'm bound to lose. I always do."

"Nonsense! Toss for first pick. You call."

"Tails."

"Heads it is, so, for my first horse, I select Jacob Z. Schnellenhamer of the Colossal-Exquisite Motion Picture Company of Hollywood, U.S.A."

"Oh, I thought they had to be *real* people!"

"Better not. There's the law of libel to be considered. Much safer to stick to the classics."

"In that case you give me no option but to choose Isadore Fishbein, president of Perfecto-Fishbein Motion Pictures, probably Inc. Your go."

"Right. I think I'll have Ben Zizzbaum, chief executive of the Zizzbaum Celluloid Corporation; so that leaves you with . . ."

"Don't prompt! That leaves me with Glutz, of the Medulla-Oblongata-Glutz Company, and that's not fair, because we're not told anything about him, not even his first name. My guess would be Sam, but we just don't know."

"Oh, but we do! His first name was Sigismund."

"You're making that up!"

"No, no. It's there in the story. Allow me to quote: 'In the ornate residence of Sigismund Glutz . . .'" It comes in *The Rise of Minna Nordstrom*, where they go along to swipe Sigismund's booze. Look it up, if you don't believe me."

"Of course I believe you. I've never caught you out in a quotation yet. All right, then, that settles the horses. The only trouble is that I don't see how we're to differentiate. They're all exactly alike."

"My *dear* child! You haven't done your homework. Allow me to help you with your sums. Jacob Schnellenhamer kept a cool head, was a quick thinker, and was married to a lady who, at one time, had been the Queen of Stormy Emotion on the silent screen. Isadore Fishbein, on the other hand, was a beater of his head against sitting-room walls, not to mention statues of Genius Inspiring the Motion Picture Industry. What his wife had been in the old days the master of English prose does not unfold, but we *do* know that in moments of stress she required eight cubes of ice in a linen bag on her forehead, so, obviously, she was as temperamental as her husband. In respect of Ben Zizzbaum . . ."

"Oh, I remember now! He was found rolling round the room in circles, with his head held between his hands."

"Probably educated during his formative years by a troupe of Cossack dancers, wouldn't you say?"

"And what about *his* wife?"

"Clearly the senior partner in the marriage. A self-controlled and eminently strong-minded woman."

"How do you deduce that?"

"She needed but six cubes of ice on her forehead as against Mrs. Fishbein's eight."

"You know," said Alison, "I was serious-minded before I married *you*!"

"My darling sweet, you couldn't have been, otherwise you never *would* have married me." He got up and went round to her end of the table.

"No!" she said, pushing him away. "You sit down and tell me all about Sigismund Glutz."

"In the library then, where, if my memory serves me, there is a favourite armchair of mine capable of . . ."

"'I love it, I love it, and who shall dare
To chide me for loving that old armchair?'"

sang Alison derisively.

"All right! You'll pay for that," said Timothy, "by helping me to fill it. Now, then," he continued, when they had adjourned to the library, "to the matter of Sigismund Glutz. Compared with the others, I regard him as almost human."

"How can you claim that, when I still say we know nothing about him?"

"Come sit with me and be my love, and I'll tell you. No, don't thresh about! Have you no respect for my digestive processes? I've only just had breakfast, don't forget."

"'Have mind upon your health; tempt me no further!'" retorted Alison; but she allowed herself to be mastered, having, in fact, no option in the matter. "Now, then, tell me all about Sigismund Glutz," she repeated, as Timothy gathered her in.

"All right. Relax, and I will complete your education. With regard to Sigismund Glutz, we are told that while Isadore Fishbein was banging his head against sitting-room walls, and Ben Zizzbaum was rolling round the floor in circles, and Mesdames Fishbein and Zizzbaum were going

stark mad in black satin and ice cubes, the Glutz family had been taken away by Sigismund for the weekend. Not for him the entertaining of the Duke of Wigan or the ex-King of Ruritania . . .”

“Or a hundred and eleven guests, including the Vice-President of Switzerland,” put in Alison. “I remember it all now.”

“So I see him in the eyes of the world the wealthy and powerful chief of Medulla-Oblongata-Glutz, surrounded by Vice-Presidents, Yes-Men, and Noddies, but in private life he must have been the average well-meaning, obliging, henpecked, child-ridden family man, uncomplaining, much-married, dutiful, and obedient, meekly trotting off for the weekend with wife and kids complete.”

“And you think this Glanvilliers Ryanston—oh, my goodness !”

“Yes, it’s even worse when you say it than when you only see it written down.”

“Anyway, I don’t believe it. Mrs. Miles must have got it wrong. *Nobody* could be called Glanvilliers Ryanston.”

“What about Wurzel-Flummery?”

“Yes, but they only allowed themselves to take the name so that they could inherit fifty thousand pounds.” She smiled at him and ruffled his hair. “Would *you*, if you had such an offer?”

“Call myself Wurzel-Flummery? No, I would *not*, but, against that, I don’t *want* fifty thousand pounds.”

“I forgot your middle name was Croesus. Let me see the letter again.”

“You carelessly left it on the breakfast table. Anyway, reading it again won’t make any difference. I’ve decided that he’s a Zizzbaum, and, if he is, then I win.”

“No, he was born Smith, Jones, Brown, or Robinson, and his wife invented the name of Glanvilliers Ryanston in order that he should have to live up to it and so get on in the

world. And if that is so, he is wife-ridden and must be a Glutz, so I win."

"Let's have another five bob on it, this secondary bet to be cancelled if he turns out to be a Schnellenhamer or a Fishbein."

"I think I'll hedge. I think he *is* a Schnellenhamer."

"All right, we'll wait and see. I wonder how soon we can expect him? One thing—I've got my answer ready. I am *not* having Phisbe mixed up in films, whatever the ghastly Madame Miles may think. Thank goodness there are still a few of the decencies left!"

In the event, all bets were void. Glanvilliers Ryanston, who turned up at half-past three on the following afternoon, resembled the Wodehouse characters, on which the wagers were based, in one respect only. He was indubitably Jewish, having been born in Golders Green of rich but honest parents whose family name was Goldstein and who had been British subjects since some years before the war, when they had contrived to leave Germany for their own good.

Ryanston, né Goldstein, was a slim, dark, personable young man, polite, persuasive, and determined, and he stated his business calmly, clearly, and briefly. Timothy, feeling rather like a reasonably gifted chess-player who has inadvertently come face to face with the international champion, got rid of him in the end with a facile and slightly mendacious promise to "look into the thing with my committee and let you know." His intention was certainly to call a committee meeting. He was determined, however, to make sure that it turned down Ryanston's suggestions. To his immense surprise, he was soon made aware that Alison did not agree with his decision to sway the voting.

"Play the game, ref," she said, when, the visitor having taken his departure in a blood-red Jaguar, Timothy disclosed his intentions.

"But, darling girl, Phisbe doesn't exist in order to find locations for films!"

"What sort of locations does he want?"

"He wants a period house—exact period not specified—a ruined castle with a lot of it still standing, a large barn, a folly, a ruined church, and an old bridge."

"Why can't he find them for himself?"

"I asked him that, and he told me that the stuff is for an educational film and has to be strictly vetted. What he meant was that we could find the settings very much more quickly than the film people can, and also get permission for them to be used. He wants to begin filming at the end of May, if that's possible."

"I don't see why you shouldn't help him. Look at *Far From the Madding Crowd*. The settings *were* the film!"

"As an old inhabitant of Wessex, I suppose you *would* think like that. There was also, allow me to remind you, a Thomas Hardy story, not to mention some first-class acting and an almost inspired use of colour in that film."

"Oh, yes, granted, but none of that would have been the same without the settings. Think of that shot of Bat's Head where the sheep went over the cliff! Think of the swordplay on the ramparts of Maiden Castle, and the coastline near Durdle Door where the soldier swam out to sea! Think of the old barn at Abbotsbury, the manor house at Bloxworth where Bathsheba Everdene lived, and Waddon House, near Portesham, Boldwood's home. Then there was the folly—Horton Tower—where the cock-fighting took place. (How did they get round the law in that particular sequence?—it looked horribly real!) And do remember all the lovely shots of the hill fields round about Encombe in Purbeck! If Phisbe can help Mr. Ryanston to produce *that* sort of filming, I think it jolly well ought to, so there!"

"And them's your last words on the subject, are they? Well, will you kindly remember that Phisbe—otherwise the Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest

—in this case means *me*, Timothy Francis Herring? It would be *my* thankless task to tour the countryside looking for sites destined (if I could find them) to make a plutocratic film magnate even richer than he is already. Why on earth should I sweat myself to the bone and waste my petrol on *his* behalf?"

"Oh, Tim, don't throw cold water on the scheme before you've at least consulted the committee. And when I say "consulted" I *don't* mean when you've browbeaten, bamboozled, and bullied them. Left to themselves they might think quite well of the commission. I bet the treasurer would, anyway, because there is bound to be a monetary return for our trouble."

"*Our* trouble! You mean, as I have already pointed out, *my* trouble. Why on earth should I do Mrs. Miles' confounded and ridiculous bidding just to oblige her beastly friends? She's a dratted nuisance and always has been. I'm sick to death of her!"

"Yes," said Alison, in a meek voice, "of course you are. After all, to your obviously bitter and sustained regret, the dratted nuisance aforesaid was the means of bringing you and me together. I don't wonder you're sick to death of her. You have every right to be, you poor wife-ridden thing. My heart bleeds for you, and if I could think of any reason for it, I'd let you divorce me." She raised her head from his shoulder and kissed him under the angle of his jaw.

"Look," said Timothy, "I've never given you a tanning yet, but, as Psmith would say, you must learn to distinguish between the unusual and the impossible, so stop taking unnecessary risks." His arms tightened around her. Alison laughed and kissed him again.

The result of the conversation was that, at the next committee meeting, he put the proposition fairly to the members without expressing bias of any kind, and, to his mingled amusement and chagrin, he was given *carte blanche* and the Society's blessing to track down (if

possible, within reasonable distances of one another), a period house, a ruined castle, an old bridge, a folly, a large barn, and a ruined church.

"So now see what you've done!" he said to Alison as he drove her home from the meeting. "You are a most undutiful woman, and your punishment will be to accompany me on my loathsome quest for these unmentionable locations and help me to assess and chart them. All this will be instead of spending Easter in Paris, and serve you jolly well right!"

"Were we going to spend Easter in Paris?"

"I wasn't, but I thought *you* might like to."

"I'd much rather help you run Mrs. Miles' fools' errands—really I would. I don't see why it shouldn't be pretty good fun, and if only it hadn't been Mrs. Miles' suggestion you'd think the same. Cut loose from your cocoon of prejudice and obstinacy, and look at the issue objectively. You know I'm right. It will be something really interesting to do. Where shall we start—and when?"

Timothy accelerated and they covered those miles of motorway which lay between Beaconsfield and Stokenchurch at a speed which terrified Alison.

"All right, that's enough naughty temper," she said, when he slowed to what seemed a crawling pace through the village. "Now be nice, and admit that you're a pig-headed, self-opinionated, conceited, intractable, bullying roughneck."

"All right," said Timothy, grinning. "Admit that you've just been scared stiff."

"You know I was, you uncouth beast!"

CHAPTER TWO

Netherton Fivefields

“Erlinton had a fair daughter;
I wot he wear’d her in a great sin;
For he has built a bigly bower,
And a’ to put that lady in.”

Border Ballad—*Erlinton*

On marshes bordering the rivers kingcups were showing and, matching their mollyblob gold, the shining lesser celandine starred banks above the ditches. Primroses were out, purple willows, alders, beeches, and hazels were dripping with catkins, gorse was in flower on the heathland, and when Alison left the car to stretch her long legs and take the air she found a root of dark sweet violets.

The car, heading south from the Cotswolds, had passed through Marlborough and Salisbury and crossed a broad and beautiful reach of the Hampshire Avon. After Fordingbridge it followed a maze of minor roads until its occupants could see, on a little, flat-topped hill, the ruined church of Netherton Fivefields.

The village had been decimated by the Black Death. The villagers’ hovels had been left to decay and had long since disappeared, and the church had fallen into decrepitude. A new village had grown up some miles to the east and its church had been built and consecrated soon

after the time that Urban V left Avignon and the papal power and pomp returned to Rome. A late-fourteenth-century tower could be seen among some trees, and not far away stood an eighteenth-century folly whose manor house was not, from the road, disclosed to view.

The ruined church, which was what Alison and Timothy were making the journey to see, was distinguished, if not unique, by having been built within a circle of irregular banks and ditches which marked the existence of a very much older sacred site. This had been protectively fenced in, but a wicket-gate on a latch gave entrance to the ruins.

"There's a round-barrow over there," said Alison, pointing, "and from where we are I can make out three circles of banking." They had left the car on the roadside verge and had come to the wicket-gate, which Timothy opened. "The inner one, with the church inside it, is still complete; then there's a broken-up bank and ditch, and where we're standing the outer bank's been flattened, but you can trace its outline over there towards that farm. Same period as Avebury, I think."

"No monoliths."

"There could have been a timber stockade or heavy timber uprights. It would be worth while to dig, if we could get permission."

"Curb the enthusiasm. It's the church we've come to see. Wonder who owns the land? It can't be the Ministry of Works or the National Trust, or it would say so. Well, come on, let's go."

"Wait a minute while I take a photograph."

The Norman edifice was roofless. Its ivy-covered tower was still standing, but of its staircase only half-a-dozen broken stone treads remained. The entrance to the church was by way of a gap where the south door had been placed, and the interior of the building now consisted of the remains of nave and chancel, with an arcade of round-headed openings with traces of billet moulding. These arches

separated the main part of the nave from the north aisle. An early English window with three narrow arches, its stonework badly weathered, lighted the east end of the chancel.

"What does Mr. Ryanston want with a church?" asked Alison.

"I've no idea. Perhaps the film story includes a Black Mass."

"I say, do you know you're trespassing?" asked a voice from behind them. Alison and Timothy looked round. There had been nobody about when they had left the car, and they had heard no sound of approaching footsteps over the long, rough grass which surrounded the ruined church. A girl was standing in the damaged opening which afforded the only entrance.

"I'm frightfully sorry if we're trespassing," began Timothy, "but the gate was on the latch, so . . ."

"Don't I know you?" asked Alison, interrupting him and addressing the sturdy girl. "Aren't you . . ."

"Annabel Leigh. Not the Edgar Allan Poe one, but the one who used to be in your history group at school. How do you do, Miss Pallis? Come back all I said about trespassing! It's nice to see you." She advanced and held out her hand.

"Mrs. Herring now," said Alison. "This is my husband."

"How do you do, Mr. Herring? What was all that about a Black Mass? Oh, I say! You're not Timothy Herring for the Society for the Prevention, and so forth, are you? If so, I'm one of your members. Are you prospecting on behalf of Phisbe? I say, do come up to the house and have some lunch and tell us all about it. I'm so glad you're married to Marchmont. I had a fearful crush on her at school. I hope she didn't know!"

"Considering that I remember you chiefly as a plague and a nuisance, and one given to asking unanswerable questions in class, no, I most certainly *didn't* know!" said

Alison. "You say we're trespassing? To whom does this land belong, then?"

"To the Leighs, of course, so you'd better come along and drink life to them."

"Punning is an execrable taste," said Timothy, "and certainly don't become a young woman. However, as you have kindly withdrawn the charge that we are trespassing, I feel I ought to tell you that we are here on behalf of the Jacob Z. Schnellenhamer Film Company of Hollywood, U.S.A. What do you think of that!"

"Oh, I say, do tell me all about it on our way to the house! Is that your car? What a beauty! Will you give me a lift?"

The house, distant some few miles by road and lane from the church, had been built as a late-fifteenth-century hall, but had received additions and alterations during the succeeding four hundred years and now presented a jumble of contrasting styles.

Two tall stone pillars, each crowned with a Caroline urn from which some ivy was growing, marked the gateless entrance, and there had been no lodge. The central feature of the south side of the mansion was an early Tudor doorway surmounted by a diamond-patterned brick tower which ended in a steeply pitched gable. The gables which topped the wings on either side of the tower had attic windows of the same period, but the fenestration on the ground floor and the first floor had been altered to give the principal rooms more light. This was now provided by tall, narrow windows with triangular pediments and ornamentation in the form of scroll-work and pendants of stone.

"Well, here we are. Welcome to Fivefield Hall," said Annabel. She tugged on an ancient bell-pull whose handle was of wrought iron, and a woman servant opened the door. They entered the hall. It was in the two parts sometimes favoured by the architects of the early seventeenth century,

and these two parts were separated by a stone screen with a broad uncurtained archway in its centre. The walls were panelled in dark wood and through the arch could be seen a fine, broad-balustered staircase. This interior part of the hall, into which Annabel led the way, was furnished with a late-seventeenth-century Derbyshire chair, an Elizabethan joint-stool and an oak box-stool of the time of Charles II.

A modern note, and one which, to the visitors, was incongruous and sadly tasteless, was struck by the bust of a young man on whose otherwise naked shoulders the sculptor had fastened in coloured material the insignia of a squadron leader in the Royal Air Force. On a Chippendale vase-stand in front of it stood an electric light in the form of a red sanctuary lamp. The bust, presenting its profile and sentimentally treated in the fashion of the early 1920s, was reminiscent, in its unlikely and slightly sickening saintliness, of the photograph of Rupert Brooke which adorned the title page of the earlier editions of the poet's *1914 and Other Poems*.

The visitors followed Annabel and were shown into a large, well-proportioned room occupied, at the moment of their entrance, by a tall, thin, elderly gentleman and two women of late middle age. The man was holding a skein of wool for one of the women; the other woman was feeding a handsome borzoi with chocolates.

"Oh, really, Aunt Wallie!" expostulated Annabel. "You'll make him sick! Anyway, look who's here!" She introduced the guests, who learned that the relatives were Aunt Wulfilda, Aunt Waltruda, and Uncle Ordulf. "Mr. and Mrs. Herring are going to film a Black Mass at the old church, and they're staying for lunch. After that, I'm showing them over the estate," she went on.

Alison's observant ex-schoolmistress's eye caught a horrified glance which passed between the elderly gentleman and the woman who was winding the wool. Interpreting it, she exclaimed immediately,

"It's very kind of Annabel to suggest that we stay for lunch, but I'm afraid we have to meet our producer in Shaftesbury at half-past one, and have promised to lunch with him at the *Dragon* and report progress. We just came along to apologise for trespassing. We didn't realize the church was private property, and we'd like to ask if we may come along to look at it again at some time."

"We don't want a Black Mass," said Aunt Waltruda, the dog-spoiler, going over to a bunch of dried sage which was hanging beside the empty fireplace. "And that's the last of the chocolates, Boris, so shoo!"

"Well, if you can't stay for lunch, why not come back to tea?" said Uncle Ordulf. "When you've had another look at the church, perhaps."

Alison glanced from the tall, thin, wool-winding Aunt Wulfilda, with her air of disdainful good breeding, to the puffy-faced Aunt Waltruda, sniffing at the bunch of dried sage, and left the responses to her husband.

"It's very kind of you," said Timothy. "Thank you so much. We'll look forward to this afternoon, then."

"I'll see you to your car," said Annabel. "We have tea at five sharp," she added, when they were outside the house, "and Aunt Wallie gets busy with her ouija board after that, so—if you don't mind being a bit punctual? I say, I suppose you couldn't get me a small part in the film, could you? I'm bored to death here."

"All those astonishing lies of yours with the verisimilitudinous embellishments!" said Timothy severely to his wife when they were out on the open road. "How come? Didn't you *want* to stay to lunch? Did you find the household somewhat off-putting, or aren't you hungry?"

"Darling, they didn't want us to stay. Annabel hasn't altered. She never did possess any of the finer feelings, and, anyway, she always had an anti-social habit of speaking first and thinking afterwards. Didn't you notice the horror with which her remark about staying to lunch was received?"

"No, I can't say I did. Did they take an instant dislike to us, do you think?"

"I fancy the reason they didn't want us is far more practical. I expect the lunch is chops or cutlets, or something else that comes in individual portions and has to be counted. I think they realized there wouldn't be enough to go round."

"Oh, I see. Well, I'm glad you don't think we repelled them, and I must say I did admire your spur-of-the-moment excuses. I had no idea you possessed the gift of extempore fabrication to such a beautifully finished degree. Oh, well, hilltop historic Shaftesbury, here we come!"

"Don't be silly! You know as well as I do that there's a perfectly good picnic lunch in the boot."

"And there it can jolly well stay. Feed it to the birds! You've just dashed a good hot meal from my slavering jaws, so you are certainly not going to get away with fobbing me off on to sandwiches and bottled beer! If you *will* tell gorgeous fibs, you must expect me to take advantage of them. Fancy even knowing the name of the hotel and everything!"

"Well, actually, I made up the name, but I had to extricate us somehow. I wonder whether the bridge and barn Annabel mentioned are any good? If we can recommend them *and* the old church and the folly to Mr. Ryanston, we're half-way home."

Mindful of Annabel's hint that strict punctuality was desirable, Timothy and Alison returned to the mansion at a quarter to five to find a singular rite in progress. The door was opened by the elderly maidservant who put a finger to her lips and motioned them in without speaking. She pointed to a monks' bench which stood against the side wall just inside the front door, bobbed a curtsey to indicate that her informal and secretive manner of admitting the visitors was none of her choosing, and vacated the hall by means of a side door which they had not noticed on their earlier visit.

What they did notice was that she was in stockinged feet and that the doors, including the front door, opened and closed without a sound.

There were sounds in the inner hall, however. This was now curtained off, and from the hidden interior beyond the screen came a low murmuring, as though a litany was being said. Alison held her breath and listened intently. The words were in Latin and seemed, with some slight but significant omissions, to be taken from the book of Psalms.

The concerted recital came to an end. There followed a silence, as though the participants either were silently praying or were waiting for something to happen. After this, the recital was taken up by one voice only—the clear and youthful tones of Annabel Leigh.

“Sederunt principes et adversum me loquebantur et iniqui persecuti sunt me. Circumdederunt me gemitus mortis, dolores inferni circumdederunt me. Dinumeraverunt omnia ossa mea et sicut aqua effusus sum.

“Quare faciem tuam avertis, oblivisceris tribulationem nostram? In die clamavi et nocte coram te. Esto mihi in deum protectorem et in locum refugii ut salvum me facias, quoniam firmamentum meum et refugium meum es tu. Justus es et rectum judicium tuum. Fac cum servo tuo secundum misericordiam tuam.”

Timothy looked at Alison and raised interrogative eyebrows. As she shrugged off the implied question, a scrambling noise indicative of persons rising to their feet from a kneeling position was accompanied by the reappearance of the elderly servant. At the same time the thin silk curtain which had been screening the archway between the inner and outer hall was drawn aside. Timothy rose to his feet and Alison followed suit as the maid, who had remembered their names from their previous visit, announced them.

Aunt Wulfilda came forward, icily gracious and calm.

“So sorry,” she said, formally. “We were just communing with dear Erik. Do come along and have some tea.”

“Oh, do, yes,” said Aunt Waltruda, turning from the bust whose head she had just denuded of a wreath of paper poppies. She raised her voice. “Boris! Boris, darling! Come to mum! Prayer-time over! Tea-time, darling! Come to mum!”

Tea at Netherton Fivefields was complicated by the presence of the borzoi and two cats whose requirements appeared to be of paramount importance, but it was over at last, and by six o’clock Annabel and the elderly Uncle Ordulf, who was known to her with a mixture of affection and derision as Boffin, had arranged to meet Alison and Timothy on the following morning and conduct them over the estate.

“The aunts always breakfast in bed,” said Annabel, when the time of meeting had been agreed, “but if you can get here by ten I can show you over most of the house as well. It’s not bad, and it’s really quite compact, in spite of the alterations.”

“Well, what did you make of them all?” asked Timothy, as they returned to the hotel where they had lunched and where he had booked a room for the night.

“I shouldn’t think it’s much of a life for Annabel. No wonder she’d like a part in Mr. Ryanston’s film! She has a right to be bored, stuck in a place like that, with those rather weird relatives and no other young people around.”

“Oh, did you find the relatives weird? Rather a sinister adjective, I think. I merely found them three elderly, possibly slightly eccentric, eminently respectable persons.”

“Oh, but, Tim! That awful bust with the shoulder straps and the simpering nakedness!”

“You make it sound like the photograph of an Edwardian second-rate actress!”

“But the sanctuary lamp! The wreath of poppies! The mumbo-jumbo!”

“People do these things, and they’ve a right to their sentimentality if it gives them comfort. I expect the young man was the family idol. Who do you think he was—Annabel’s elder brother?”

“More likely her father, I should think, but she was never in my form at school. I only had her for history, so I don’t know very much about her.”

“I must ask Sabrina. She’ll have all the dope. We’ve only got single beds in this hostelry, by the way. Glad it’s for one night only.”

“It isn’t cold at this time of year.”

“As I know perfectly well that you don’t misunderstand me to that naughty extent, I shall make no comment. All the same, I hate to waste even a single night unless I have to. I don’t look forward to the time when:

“‘Then one arose at her bed-fit,
And a grumly guest I’m sure was he:
Here am I, thy bairn’s father,
Although that I be not comelie.’

“I don’t want to grow gruff, old and ugly.”

“You’re too comely by half, and I suppose you always will be. That’s why I never trust you out of my sight,” said Alison, “but I agree that it won’t be much fun when ‘Age, with a pale and withered hand, draws furrows in our faces,’ especially as it will happen first to me.”

“Are we becoming somewhat morbid?”

“We’ve come from a morbid environment.”

“That must be the explanation. Let’s cast care aside and have champagne with our dinner. Although I should wish, at this juncture, to compare you to a summer’s day—you certainly *are* more lovely—I don’t want you to become too temperate.”

“Who took Annabel Leigh to task for making puns?”

"I did, I'm sorry to say. Do you really think she has a rotten time in that house?"

"Well, I have a feeling that it might do her a lot of good if she could let it to Mr. Ryanston for his film. I wonder whether it would do?—the house, I mean. It's awfully shabby, although some of the furniture is good. I expect they could do with some money. There seemed to be only the one servant who let us in and brought the tea, and what I saw of the garden out of the morning-room window looked in an awful mess. I suppose that means they can't afford gardeners. They haven't even a cook, most likely."

"Difficult to get servants nowadays, especially so far from the madding crowd, of course."

"More especially if you're eccentric—and that is putting it extremely mildly. I think those people are mad."

"I'm sure you're exaggerating."

"No, I'm not. Apart from the Latin tag-ends, didn't you notice the anti-witchcraft walking sticks?"

"Where?"

"There was one hanging in the chimney of that room we were shown into this morning, and there was another in the room where we had tea."

"Oh, those patterned glass things? Merely there for ornament, wouldn't you say?"

"Then what about the clove of garlic painted in the corner of that hideous portrait over the rather nice Sheraton sideboard? And the bunches of sage everywhere? And the triskelion painted in the corner of that other portrait over the Adam card-table?"

"Oh, painters have all sorts of ways of signing their work."

"They don't usually sign it by painting in a charm against the Evil One."

"Oh, come, now! 'Tis the eye of childhood that fears a painted devil.'"

"I know. All the same, Tim, I don't like Netherton Fivefields. I don't like Uncle Ordulf. Aunt Waltruda terrifies me, and I think Aunt Wulfilda is a bully and a martinet. Besides, there's the house itself. It's too old. It's like some raddled old harridan who's seen and known and suffered far too much and doesn't give a damn any more. If I really believed in ghosts, I'd say it's haunted. I loathe every bit of it."

"Look, if there's anything there wearing chains and a sheet, it will clank and jibber at Ryanston, not at us, and *he* won't give a damn for the Evil One, *or* a chocolate-fed borzoi, *or* pampered pussycats, *or* sage and onions, or any other damn thing. Anyway, I have to go back to Netherton Fivefields tomorrow, even if you don't come along. The arrangement is made. I can't alter it now. But you stay here, if you want to. I don't mind a bit if you do."

"I'm sorry. I'm being silly."

"You're made that way, and I like it. Don't worry. Those poor old things are harmless enough, and think how jolly it will be to get Mrs. Miles off our necks. Besides, who suggested that the family might be glad to let the film people use the house? If there's poverty there, however genteel, we ought to be glad to weigh in, especially as you know the girl and want to help her."

"I *said* I was being silly. Do I have to say I'm sorry again? *Of course* it would be a good thing to give them some help. It's time I remembered that the aunts are poor, unsponsored maiden ladies. I was one myself not so very long ago, come to think of it."

"Ah, well, so were Portia, Viola, and Rosalind, in their time. Unfortunately there's another of Shakespeare's ladies you call to mind, apart from those I mentioned. There is something about you at present which links you with Caesar's noble wife Calpurnia."

"*Because* she was Caesar's wife, with all the chilly virtues which that implies?"

"No, I wasn't thinking of the 'chaste as ice' aspect."

"I'm not as flattered as I hoped I was going to be. Why do I remind you of her, then?"

"Because she had an irrational sense of impending doom."

"But, as matters turned out, it *wasn't* irrational, was it? So you *did* think Netherton Fivefields had some sinister undertones!"

"I've been thinking about that weird service, or whatever it was. Could you make anything of it?"

"Having been compelled to learn Latin, although I never had to teach it, I think I could follow it, but what I made of it didn't make sense."

"Oh, I don't know. I thought I recognized the voice of King David here and there."

"Yes, I know. I think all the *bits* came from the psalms, but although, put together, the whole thing had some kind of meaning, it was all composed of snippets, you know."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I was rather devout at one time and I recognised the various oddments. That invocation, or whatever it was, didn't come from any one psalm, so far as I know. It began with a fit of melancholy. 'Princes set themselves against me and the wicked persecuted me. The groans of death . . .'"

"A nice example of personification. 'The groans of death surrounded me, the sorrows of hell . . .'"

"You can't use 'surround me' again, so the missal translates the second *circumdederunt me* as 'encompassed me.' Then there came, if I remember rightly, something about bones."

"Yes, I got that bit. 'They have numbered all my bones and I am poured out like water.'"

"Then came the reproaches. David, if it *was* David, which is open to doubt . . ."

"Same like Homer?—more than one of him?"

"Yes. David, I was going to say, was good at reproaches. 'Why turnest thou thy face away and forgettest our trouble? I have cried before thee night and day.' Didn't you notice the significant omission in all this, though?"

"I thought the whole thing was rather odd."

"Yes, I know. I meant that the psalms proper (so to speak), including even the reproachful bits, were religious songs, yet all the actual references to God by name had been very carefully left out of this Fivefield version."

"Oh, come, now! what about *esto mihi in deum*, and the rest of it?"

"I don't believe *deum*, in this particular connection, would be spelt with a capital letter. 'Be thou unto me a god' was addressed, I'm pretty certain, to that horribly sentimental bust."

"But it went on: 'a protector and a place of refuge to save me, for thou art my strength.' Then the word 'refuge' was repeated, I think."

"Yes, 'for thou art my strength and my refuge.' It went on: 'Thou art just and thy judgment is right; deal with thy servant according to thy mercy.'"

"Well, wouldn't you call that a prayerful invocation?"

"No. Well, I mean yes, but I still think the prayer was addressed to that . . ."

"Horribly sentimental bust, I believe you called it. You couldn't *prove* the idolatry you're suggesting, you know."

"Perhaps not. Anyway, the whole thing gave me the shivers, and to get rid of them I think I shall ask Annabel Leigh to tell me all about it."

"I wouldn't. If it's sacrilegious she won't admit it, and if it isn't you'll give yourself away."

"Well, I don't like it, and I don't like the house. Uncle Ordulf is just simple, but Aunt Waltruda is quite mad and I think Aunt Wulfilda, with that *grande dame* manner of hers, is a ghoul. They've got some hold over Annabel, or why did

she say that terrifying prayer by herself? What are they trying to do to her?"

"Don't let your imagination run away with you. That service or incantation or whatever it is, must simply be an old Spanish custom of the household. Think of the *Musgrave Ritual*."

"I don't want to, and I hope you'll warn Mr. Ryanston that he's meddling with something very unpleasant if he decides to use any part of Netherton Fivefields for his film."

"I have no fears on Ryanston's behalf. If he takes the setup as seriously as you do, he'll probably incorporate the whole doings in his story and make his fortune by it. The public, especially the female population, loves horrors."

"Well, I don't love them, and I wish I could get Annabel out of that horrible house."

"Well, you will, if Ryanston rents the place, won't you?—and I don't see why he shouldn't."

CHAPTER THREE

A Preliminary Survey

“‘Yes, I know about that. But there is something wrong with the place still. All I can say is that Broughton is a different man since he has lived here.’”

Percival Landon—*Thurnley Abbey*, 1908

In spite of any irrational fears she may have entertained concerning the inhabitants of Netherton Fivefields, Alison insisted upon accompanying Timothy to Fivefield Hall next morning.

“It’s *my* camera,” she said, in answer to his protests, “and we shall need some more photographs to show Mr. Ryanston. Besides, I’m interested.”

Annabel must have been looking out for them, for, as soon as the car drew up outside the Tudor entrance, she herself opened the door. Her mood, however, had changed. She looked and sounded surly as she invited them in.

“Whose is the bust?” asked Timothy, when they reached the foot of the stairs. Annabel replied,

“I don’t see that it’s any business of yours, but, if you want to know, it’s Uncle Erik. At some time or other the family lost track of him and he never turned up again, so I presume he’s dead. Aunt Wulfilda and Aunt Waltruda had the bust done from a rather frightful photograph of him as a

young man. He was their brother-in-law, or something, I believe. I call Boffin my uncle, but really he's my great-uncle, of course. Well, where would you like to go first?" She spoke with an uneasy abruptness which was surprisingly different from her easy-going, friendly attitude of the previous day.

"As you know your way about, and we do not, I think we will leave you to guide us," said Alison. "You have been told the things we want to see. I will take some photographs and then we will find out what Mr. Ryanston has to say, if you and your relatives are willing."

"They'll have to be willing. I do what I like with my own," said the girl roughly. "This house belongs to me."

"Do we need the car, or are the sites within walking distance?" asked Timothy gently.

"Well, if you're feeling decrepit, I suppose we could take the car as far as the barn and then drive most of the way to the bridge. After that we must walk, because there's nothing but a footpath up to the folly. I'd better drive," said the girl.

"No. I'm quite accustomed to following the directions of a navigator," said Timothy, who disliked handing over his car, "and I prefer to remain at the wheel."

"Oh, you *are* stuffy! I shouldn't hurt your old car!" Annabel settled herself sullenly beside him and Alison took the back seat.

"The way was long, the wind was cold,'" said Timothy lightly, although the girl's attitude made him wonder what was the matter with her.

"First right," said Annabel crossly. Timothy crawled between the Caroline gateposts and took the turning which led to the church, but before they got on to the road which they had followed to reach the house he was bidden to turn to the right again, and a winding lane, muddy from the tramping of cattle, brought them, between unkempt hedges to which the Old Man's Beard still clung in wispy fragments among the new green leaves, to an enormous old barn.

“Well, *this* ought to do,” said Timothy, surveying its vast proportions, its rammed-earth floor and its massive wind-braces. “‘The barn is old, not strange,’ as the poet said.”

“That’s all *you* know,” said Annabel sourly, “but it’s not used as a barn any more, so, if your producer wants it, he can have it—at a price, of course.”

“It will need repairing,” said Alison.

“That’s *his* worry, not mine.”

Alison, strongly resenting the girl’s curt rudeness, walked away from her and, followed by Timothy, took two or three photographs. Then, meeting her husband’s quizzical eye, she recovered her temper, got into the back seat of the car and they drove on down the lane until they came to a five-barred gate set back far enough for Timothy to turn the car and drive onwards to the road.

The bridge seemed a long way off, or else (as Alison suspected) the girl deliberately chose the longest way to get round to it. They passed within sight of the church and were almost halfway to Fordingbridge before Annabel gave any further directions.

The bridge was stone-built and picturesque and it spanned a slow-moving, narrow stream—not much more than a sizeable brook. This formed one of the inconsiderable tributaries which joined the Moors River some miles above where this, in its turn, flowed into the Stour. Timothy wondered whether the stream could have been wider when the bridge was built, for there were three stone arches spanning only a trickle of water.

“Hm!” he said. “It might do if they don’t want anybody diving from it or being thrown in. Better take a picture, anyway—from both sides, Alison, perhaps.”

The bridge carried a narrow, neglected road to some abandoned cottages. Beyond these a path across a field led ultimately to the folly, which stood on a little hill. It was a roofless ruin of slightly unusual shape. It appeared to have

been built in the form of three adjoining towers, the middle one of which was slightly taller than the others.

Alison photographed the folly from several angles and then followed her husband inside. There was nothing to be seen except high, damp walls up which ferns and small plants were growing. In spite of the height of the tower, and the fact that it had been built in four storeys, no floors remained and there was no sign of any form of staircase, although the various floor-levels could be made out, for the folly was well-lighted, although any glass which might have protected the windows was gone.

"Wonder how they climbed to the top storey?" said Timothy.

"I believe the Leigh who built it used nothing but ladders through trap-doors, as they do at the tops of some church towers," said Annabel. "Couldn't the film people do the same? Surely they're equal to climbing up a few rungs!"

"I don't know," said Timothy. "Anyway, I'll get them to contact you when they've seen the photographs. I don't know about the bridge. They may want a wider river and more than three arches, but it's a good structure in a pleasant setting, and should photograph well. Fourteenth century, I should guess."

"I couldn't care less what century it is. They can take it or leave it, so far as I'm concerned," retorted Annabel.

Timothy took the girl by the elbow and led her back to the car. Alison loitered behind.

"Look here, what's up, young woman?" he demanded. "You're not upset because I wouldn't let you drive the car, are you? I never let anybody except Alison and our architect touch its sacred wheel."

"Oh, forget it!" said Annabel, jerking her elbow from his friendly grasp. "Do you want to be shown over the house? It's quite worth seeing, if you're interested in mouldering old ruins." They made their way back to the car and waited for Alison to join them. The way back seemed remarkably short,

which Timothy felt was fortunate, since his passengers did not say a word until he pulled up outside Fivefield Hall.

Annabel jerked at the bell-pull and the elderly servant let them in with a warning that Miss Wulfilda had said they were to wipe their shoes if they had been tramping in among the cow-pats.

"Is Miss Wulfilda the owner of the house?" asked Timothy, when they had complied with this instruction and the servant had disappeared. "I thought you said it was yours."

"You might well think it was hers," said Annabel, with a short, unpleasant laugh. "My parents died soon after I left school, and I wasn't old enough to be allowed to please myself, so Uncle Ordulf was made my guardian and I had to come and live here. Oh, well, as you're here, you'd better take a look at the state dining-room. We only use it for parties, which means almost never. Oh, the house is mine all right, but my father never liked it, for some reason, so he let Uncle Ordulf and the aunts live in it, and I don't see any way of turning them out." She flung open a door. "Well, here you are! Here's the family mausoleum."

Timothy stepped inside and looked around. The room belonged to the remaining Tudor wing of the house and at some time a partition had been removed to convert two adjoining rooms into one, for they were at slightly different levels and the windows, both of which overlooked an unkempt garden bordered by a weed-grown terrace, were of different sizes, although both retained the diamond panes of their period.

"This is a remarkably fine room," said Timothy, gazing first at the linen-fold panelling and then up at the embossed ceiling.

"There's something more," said Annabel. She knelt at one end of a magnificent Tudor table and pressed with both thumbs against an acanthus leaf which was carved on one of its enormous bulbous legs. "Behold the way to Avernus!"

That portion of the oak floor which was enclosed by the stretchers of the table swung slowly downwards on a hinged end and disclosed a black cavity of which the bottom could not be seen.

"A priest's hole!" exclaimed Timothy. "What a find!—or have you known about it all your life?"

Annabel closed down the aperture. Her attitude appeared to have changed as she replied:

"More or less. We lived here when I was little, before my parents got tired of the place and took the house in Salisbury, and one day, when I suppose I'd been more of a pest than usual"—she glanced at Alison—"my father opened up the hole and threatened to put me into it. I never trusted him after that."

"No question of Eppie in the coal-hole, then?" asked Alison lightly.

"No fear! I was dead scared. Oh, well, this and the drawing-room, which you saw on your first visit, and the morning-room (used to be the chapel) where you had tea yesterday, are the show-pieces, but the bedrooms are quite nice, although, as in the drawing-room, the windows have all been altered. You can see my room, if you don't mind the bed not being made yet, and Boffin says I can take you into his. He'll be in there, but you must take no notice of him, because he'll be meditating. He'll join us as soon as you're ready to leave. He said he'd like to say goodbye."

Ordulf, however, appeared to have concluded his meditations.

"Ready?" he asked, when Annabel had knocked at his door. "Have you seen all you want to see, Mr. Herring?"

"Oh, yes, I think so," replied Timothy. "My wife has taken some photographs to show our producer, and if he likes them you'll be hearing from him."

"He'll pay us, of course?" said Annabel. "Or does he expect something for nothing? If so, he can jolly well go somewhere else!"

"You will make your own arrangements with him, no doubt."

"Can you suggest a figure?"

"No, that's beyond my scope. I promised to try to find him some settings, but that's as far as my agreement goes."

"I suppose you'll get *your* cut," said Annabel nastily, returning to her previous unfortunate and irritating manner.

"The Society will benefit to some extent, no doubt. If you are one of our members, you ought to be glad of that," said Timothy smoothly.

"That's a wonderful thought, Mr. Greatheart!"

"*Well!*" said Alison, as they drove away from Netherton Fivefields.

"Yes, I could feel you were coming to the boil," said Timothy, "but I thought perhaps a show-down in front of Uncle Ordulf was better avoided. Was she like that at school?"

"No, she most certainly was not. Nobody would have put up with it, for one thing."

"It was a bit odd, you know. Something must have upset her. She seemed quite different yesterday—and she did have one lucid interval today. Or didn't you notice?"

"What *you* noticed at one point, I suppose, was that only your presence, and a look you had in your eye, prevented me from giving her the dressing-down she needed."

"It might have done her good, but I rather think not. Apart from anything else, she's hardly a schoolgirl any longer, is she?"

"She's a rude little beast. She was a bit of a tike at school, but only pleasantly impudent with it—not a bit like she's been today."

"To know all is to forgive all, don't you think?"

"Yes, but we *don't* know all, and if there is one thing I find very hard to forgive it's rudeness."

"I know. And yet, before we married, wouldn't you say that *I* was rather rude to you at times?"

"Not *rather* rude. *Very* rude would be a more truthful way of putting it."

"But you didn't mind really."

"Of course I minded. Your rudeness was always a form of criticism, and I loathe being criticized."

"Don't we all? Well, now, home, sweet home, and let's hope we can soon get those photographs developed."

After lunch, for which they stopped an hour in Salisbury, Alison was silent while the car flashed past hedges, farms, and fields until they reached the stone-built villages and dry-stone walls of the Cotswolds. It was customary with her to say very little on a long drive and Timothy, concentrating his attention on the road and thinking his own thoughts, did not interrupt hers. As they left Avening and were making for Minchinhampton, she said,

"Tim, you don't think that girl's in *real* trouble, do you?"

"I think she's very unhappy, apart from being bored to death. As to being in trouble, what have you in your mind?"

"Oh, not an unwanted baby, if that's what you mean. But now I've got over my ill-temper I'm beginning to feel a bit worried again."

"I don't see there's much we can do. The best thing, I haven't any doubt, would be to prise her loose from that environment, but, apart from the fact that it's beyond our terms of reference, I'm sure it wouldn't be possible. You say the girl is twenty-two, so, legally, she's her own mistress. Couldn't she get a job, if she really wanted to get away from those aunts?"

"I suppose I'm still thinking of her as one of our girls at school."

"I know, but, after all, she isn't. One can't keep the tabs on them after they leave, you know, especially after they've come of age. One shouldn't really want to."

"I know. All the same, I'm sorry I felt so mad with her this morning. I suppose that goes back to her schooldays. You know—'I can connive at immorality, but I can't stand impudence.'"

"It's partly a question of sex. If she'd been a boy *you'd* have been far more tolerant and understanding, whereas *I* should have smacked his head or kicked his bottom."

Alison laughed.

"'Now, husband, you have nicked the matter,'" she said. Timothy pulled up as they were crossing the lonely stretch of Minchinhampton Common and took his hands from the wheel.

"Nobody about," he said. "Gis a kiss, gal?"

"It's something, I suppose, that you bother to ask," said Alison.

On the next morning but one there was an unusually heavy post. Among the bills, circulars, and catalogues there were half-a-dozen letters, two for Timothy, the rest for Alison.

"Mine are all invitations for Easter," she said. "Do you want to see them?"

"No, darling, neither do I want to accept any of them, unless you're very keen."

"What reason do I give?"

"Phisbe, of course. We are engaged for an unspecified time on work of national importance. My communications are more interesting, especially the one from Miss Annabel Leigh. The other is from Ryanston to ask what progress we're making. He's in a hurry to make a start on his film. I'll tell him I'm sending more photographs. That ought to cheer him up."

"One from Annabel? What on earth is *she* writing about?"

"Her mood is contrite to the point of self-abasement. She is so sorry she was uncouth; she hopes I will forgive her

for being so rude to us; she dare not write to *you* because, *if* you bothered to answer, she dreads what you might say. Were you really such a terrifying monster at school?"

"One had to keep one's end up. It's not so very easy, especially nowadays, when they all want to be so independent."

"She goes on to make some excuses for herself, although whether they are valid it is not for me to determine."

"I suppose she'd had a row with the aunts."

"She calls it 'an argument about taking Boris on a visit,' so I'm sure you're right. Do you want to see the letter?" He handed it over.

"Well, *you* can't do anything about it," said Alison, when she had read it.

"Release her from the family's clutches? Hardly. I can't ensure that Ryanston coughs up enough money for her to go off somewhere with her uncle, either. All I can do is to advise her to get herself an agent of some kind to look after her interests and arrange the financial side of the deal. Of course, we don't know yet whether Ryanston wants an option on any part of the Fivefield property at all. I think I'd better write back to that effect."

Alison fingered the letter. Then she looked up at him and said,

"We didn't take any photographs of the house itself, you know."

"I see what you're getting at. It might work. The only thing is, though, if it's money the girl needs, I don't want to raise her hopes of Ryanston's being prepared to rent the house, or part of it, in case it doesn't come off."

"We need only say we'd like to take some photographs for the Phisbe archives. That would be true enough—that's a very nice Tudor entrance with the tower above it, and we never even went into the garden or the park to see what the house looks like from that side—and it wouldn't commit us

to anything. I expect, judging by that letter of hers, Annabel will be very glad to see us again and learn that bygones are bygones."

"And are they?"

"So far as I'm concerned, certainly they are. I don't maintain animosity towards silly children."

"Nobly spoken! I'll get her on the telephone and tell her we're coming down. I will even be a trifle jocular, and ask her whether she knows of a castle Ryanston could use. That ought to make her smile."

They started early on the following day and turned off for Fivefield Hall just beyond the shell of the church. Annabel, all smiles, as though she was consciously trying to make up for her cavalier attitude, met them at the entrance to the house and assented enthusiastically when they suggested taking more photographs. It was a bright, sunny morning and Alison got to work at once with the camera.

"You might as well come inside," said Annabel to Timothy, "unless Miss . . . I mean Mrs. Herring . . . needs your help."

"I think I do," said Alison. "I want him to pick out the bits he thinks will impress our archivist."

"Oh, are we going to be a Phisbe exhibit?"

"Yes," said Timothy, "if we may take a walk round. Let's hope the light is right for the bits we want. Anyway, we can certainly get enough pictures to make a show."

They had reached the side of the house on to which the windows of the state dining-room looked out, and Alison was attempting to find a vantage point which did not involve her in a bed of stinging nettles, when Ordulf came out and joined them.

"My nieces and I would be glad if you would join us for coffee when you've finished out here," he said. "I knew you

were taking photographs and Wulfilda sent me with the special request that you should take a picture of Erik."

"An interior? Oh, I'm afraid—" began Alison.

"Oh, Erik can come out of doors. He is not very heavy. You, Mr. Herring, can easily manage him, if you will. Coffee first, perhaps, and then my nieces and Mrs. Herring can decide upon a suitable background for poor Erik."

"I'm sorry," said Annabel, when her great-uncle had ambled away round the side of the house. "Let's hope Aunt Ildie and Aunt Wallie don't want to be photographed with it, but I wouldn't be surprised. Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Not in the least," said Alison, hastily. "Well, that's that." She put the camera back into its case. "Oh, I wonder whether a shot of the stables might be a good idea? They're very handsome, aren't they?"

The stables were an eighteenth-century addition and had been built by the Leigh who had had the folly erected. It was a little disconcerting to find them in the possession of Aunt Waltruda, who was walking widdershins round them and muttering to herself. She stopped when she saw the new arrivals and placed herself directly in front of Alison.

"'Who can find a virtuous woman?'" she enquired malevolently.

"Well, I try to be that," said Alison, backing away.

"Stables," said Aunt Waltruda, waving her hand towards them. "Augean stables. I owned Pegasus, I owned Sleipnir, I owned Bucephalus, I owned—what won the Derby last year?"

"I have no idea," said Timothy, putting his arm round her. "What have you done with Boris, Miss Waltruda?"

"The Hound of Heaven," said the mad-woman softly, "died in very mysterious circumstances. Don't tell them I told you, but he did. Tell me, Sir Timothy, did you ever meet the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse?"

"No, but I once patted Arkle," said Timothy. "I bet you never did that!"

Alison linked her arm in that of her former pupil and they strolled towards the house, leaving the other two behind.

"Tim will cope," said Alison. "You ought to get away from here, you know. It's no place for a girl of your age."

"Don't I know it! I say, I'm dreadfully sorry about yesterday."

"That's all right." Alison, always tongue-tied when people apologised to her, felt at a double disadvantage, in that she had never liked Annabel over-much at school and she felt (irrationally) that she ought to compensate for this. On impulse she said, "Why don't you sell this place and buy a small house for the others, and get away from them and find yourself a job?"

"Well, it's not so easy," said Annabel. "You see, for one thing, I'm not qualified or trained for anything. Then, well, I've got used to it here and, after all, why should I sell up? It's mine, and I've a right to stay here if I like."

"Oh yes, of course," said Alison. "I didn't realize that you were so fond of the place. I only thought that you might be the better for a change."

"Of course I should be, but not at the price you suggest. Oh, well, let's go into the house. Boffin makes quite good coffee."

They went into the morning-room which had been the chapel and, after drinking her coffee, Alison said to the stiffly upright Wulfilda,

"I understand you'd like me to take a photograph of . . ."

"Erik? Yes, we would, if it isn't taking a liberty with your camera. We understand you want us to take the bust out of doors. Ordulf, dear . . ."

"No, let me," said Timothy, putting down his cup.

"Erik rustles with secrets," said Waltruda. "Doesn't he, Boris?"

The borzoi, who, in spite of her lugubrious statement about his demise, appeared to be in excellent health, rose in his lordly way and accompanied the party into the hall. As soon as Timothy attempted to lay hands on the bust, however, he put up such a belligerent front that Ordulf exclaimed,

“Stop egging him on, Waltruda! If you don’t want Erik photographed, you have only to say so. Mr. Herring will understand.”

“The Evil Eye!” muttered Waltruda. She gestured towards Alison’s camera. “It is the Evil Eye!”

“All right, Miss Waltruda, not to worry,” said Timothy cheerfully. “The Evil Eye it is, and we’ll have no truck with it.”

“Truck, buck, duck—”

“I see you know all about it. Come and wave me goodbye. We’re going now.”

“I’m going, too,” said Waltruda, suddenly and somewhat alarmingly lucid. “I will wish you goodbye here and now. Annabel will see you off. Come, Wulfilda. Time to see about lunch. Erik,” she added, with a crazy laugh, “must be getting hungry.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Lakeside Keep

“Take care of this handsome coach of mine, Nor
dirty my pretty red wheels so fine! Now, mice,
be ready, And, wheels, run steady! For we are
going a visit to pay To Mr. Korbes, the fox,
today.”

The Brothers Grimm—*Chanticleer and Partlet*

The scheme to photograph the bust had been abandoned, but, before she parted from Timothy and Alison, the girl, who was accompanied by her great-uncle, suddenly blurted out,

“I suppose this house wouldn’t be of any use to your producer for his film?”

“Fivefield Hall?” said Timothy, affecting surprise. “I don’t know, I’m sure. I could ask him—or perhaps *you* could. He’ll want to come down and have a look at the barn, the bridge, the church, and the folly, so perhaps you could put it to him then.”

“You see, Boffin and I have been talking things over. We want to go to Tripoli. If we could plant the aunts on some relatives we have in Wales, do you think we *could* let the house?”

“As I say, I don’t know. What I do know is that the film people are looking out for a castle.”

"A castle? Well, what about Castell Foel?" asked Ordulf, turning eagerly to his niece. "I know it's in Wales, but—well, wouldn't it do?"

"Not if we're going to send the aunts there while you and I trot off to Tripoli, darling."

"You won't bank on Tripoli, will you?" said Timothy, gently. "I mean, I'm not guaranteeing anything, you know. It rests entirely with Ryanston. He may not even want the church and the folly, let alone the barn and the bridge, and as for the house . . ."

"Oh, we may as well live in hope," said the girl. "It's about all there *is* to live for, as I see it at present."

"We could afford to send poor Waltruda and Wulfilda to a small guest-house, or somewhere, if we let this place," said Ordulf. "They've never liked the Leigh-Fifields, and, anyway, perhaps they wouldn't be welcome at Foel. We don't even know that the family are still living in Wales, come to think of it, do we, my dear? When Wulfilda mentioned the projected visit—"

"I'm not going to take Aunt Waltruda *and* that dog!"

"You know perfectly well that we shall have no option. Anyway, I was about to say that, in case she is right, and the Leigh-Fifields are no longer at Foel, it might be better if I went to Tripoli on my own while, on Mr. Ryanston's rental, you took your aunts to the small guest-house—"

"Me go with them and leave you to take yourself off to Tripoli? I wouldn't dream of it! Don't be so selfish, Boffin! Besides, you know what trouble you always get into, if we ever let you off the hook, you dreadful old man. Anyway," she went on, turning to Timothy, "if your film people want to rent a castle I feel hopeful enough to write down the address for you. I do hope you'll go and look over Castell Foel, but, after that, of course, we must leave you to please yourself."

"It is Ryanston I have to please," said Timothy patiently. "I gather that the owners of this castle in Wales are

members of your family.”

“Yes, they are, but they haven’t been on speaking terms with Boffin and the aunts for years. There was a lawsuit or something. I never did know the rights and wrongs.”

“Even if you did, Mr. Herring would not be interested, my dear,” said Ordulf, in some haste, “so let us not delve into the past. That is always a mistake. Let sleeping dogs lie!”

“Why Tripoli?” asked Alison, to change the subject.

“Oh, Boffin does archaeology when he gets the chance,” said Annabel. “Not well, not importantly, but he does it. That’s why Tripoli. There’s a dig there.”

“Just supposing,” said Timothy, “that Castell Foel would fit with the film people’s ideas, do you really think the owners would be prepared to let it to Mr. Ryanston?”

“I should think they’d be only too pleased. None of our family has any money except a young cousin of mine, and she can’t get hers until she comes of age.”

“You could ask Wulfilda about the castle. She used to be in touch with Leigh-Fifields before there was all the fuss,” said Ordulf, “and we got the bust of Erik.”

“I notice that you pay tribute to his memory,” said Alison. “Was he shot down during the war?”

“No, no,” said Ordulf hastily. “The insignia are a little fancy of Waltruda’s. We tend to indulge her, you know. Life is made easier for us that way.”

“What, exactly, is the significance of your little ceremony?” asked Timothy. “We came early enough to overhear some of it, and found it very interesting.”

“Oh, it is just an ancient ritual which we found in an old book in the library, isn’t it, Annabel?” said Ordulf, in what could be taken as a meaningful and spiteful tone. “You know more about it than I do.”

“That’s not true, so I don’t know why you tease me. Anyway, it’s just another example of Aunt Waltruda’s

dottiness," said Annabel pettishly. "It's meaningless. I don't know why we keep it up."

"I expect Annabel has shown you the priest's hole in the dining-room," said Ordulf. "There is some connection, I believe, between that and the ritual."

"Yes, we saw it," said Timothy. "Was it ever used?"

"Oh, yes," replied Ordulf, "it was used. Oh, yes, it was used. In fact, if Waltruda is to be believed . . ."

"Which, thank goodness, she isn't!" said Annabel.

". . . it is still in use."

"Really?" Timothy asked, as some comment appeared to be called for.

"Only in a figurative sense, of course," explained Ordulf. "At least, that isn't, perhaps, quite what I mean. She thinks Erik's spirit is down there, so she opens it up occasionally—at Christmas time and on what she says was his birthday and on the anniversary of the day she claims she first knew he was missing—and then she burns incense—that kind of thing. Ritual fascinates her, and, of course, she has a fixation on the fellow."

Annabel snorted.

"I wouldn't mind, if she'd leave *us* out of it," she said. "But kneeling round that ghastly hole, with its graveyard smell and the cold, damp air coming up, and the incense being wafted about until one feels quite faint—"

"We must humour her, my dear," said Ordulf. "It may not be for very much longer."

Alison glanced at her husband, sensing an implied threat in the cliché, but Timothy returned her gaze with lifted eyebrows and a bland smile.

"It's all very well, you know," she said, after they had reached their Cotswold home and Netherton Fivefields and its Hall were far enough away, "but the more I see and hear of Annabel's ghoulish relatives, the more I wish we'd never had anything to do with them."

"I'm sure they're nothing worse than rather eccentric."

“What about Uncle Ordulf’s last remark?”

“I saw it jolted you, but why? People as bloated and puffy as Aunt Waltruda often do pop off in middle age. That’s all he meant, unless he was referring to this pipe-dream of Tripoli, leaving the women behind. It’s too near bedtime to be thinking of painted devils, but if you’re scared you shall have a night-light? Will that do?”

“I’m not scared so long as you’re around. You’re too much of a devil yourself to give the painted ones much chance. Let’s change the subject. What about Castell Foel? Does the name have a meaning?”

“Castle on a bare hill, I believe.”

“That sounds rather fascinating. Do let’s go and take a look at it.”

“I’ll find out first how Ryanston reacts to what we’ve got for him already, before I go on a wild goose chase across the Welsh marches.”

“You could look in on Castell Nanradoc and see how the Aloysius Raffertys are coping now they’re married, and whether they’re ready for the summer visitors. Oh, and we could rope in Diana and Tom Parsons, and get Tom’s opinion on Castell Foel. If it’s a ruin it would be a good idea to get an architect to look it over, wouldn’t it?”

“I don’t think it can be a ruin if these relations are living in it.”

“Oh, but I don’t think they are. From something Annabel said before we left, I think there’s a modern house and the castle is in the grounds.”

“Look, as I’ve already suggested to Miss Leigh, do let us see what Ryanston has to say about Netherton Fivefields before we put any more on our plate. You get your pictures developed—I’ll run them into Stroud tomorrow morning—and then we’ll send them off to him and wait and see what his reaction is. All right?”

“Very well, but it wouldn’t hurt to *sound* Tom and Diana, would it? I mean, it wouldn’t really be a bad idea to go along

and take a look at the castle while Mr. Ryanston is making up his mind about the other bits. It might save a lot of time in the end. As a matter of fact . . .”

“Ah!” said Timothy. “I *thought* there was more than somewhat in the wind. Come on! Out with it! What have you got up your sleeve? Some devilment, I suppose.”

“Certainly not! It’s only that, among the letters which must have been delivered while we were out, there was one from Diana herself. Tom hasn’t any particular job on hand at present, so she wonders whether we’d like to go to Shrewsbury and pay them a visit. What do you think? Shall we go?”

“What on earth is the point of asking me what I think? I can see you’ve made up your mind. All right. Better ring them up straightway and ask when they’d like us to come, and we could tell them about the castle. I’ll tell Johnson to send on any letters, in case we get Ryanston’s reply while we’re away from home.”

“Much better send him the Parsons’ number when we send him the photographs. These film people never write letters if it’s possible to use the telephone.”

“We don’t need to visit Nanradoc unless you’re particularly keen on it,” said Tom Parsons, when Timothy and Alison arrived at his Shrewsbury home a few days later. “I was over there a fortnight ago to make sure everything about the building was ship-shape for the coming season, and it’s all as right as rain.”

“Oh, no, don’t let’s waste time going to Nanradoc,” said his wife. “I’m dying to see Castell Foel, and your clients sound a very odd lot, them and their Evil Eye! Is Aunt Waltruda mad?”

“Nor’ nor’east, I would say,” said Timothy. “It’s the girl I feel sorry for. It’s her property, and she’s stuck with these elderly relatives.”

“Girl?” said Tom Parsons. “A child, do you mean?”

“She’ll be about twenty-two,” put in Alison.

"Then she ought to be out and about, having fun with her contemporaries," said Diana.

"Yes, it won't be much fun to escort old Uncle Ordulf to Tripoli," said Alison.

"If he'll take her with him. He didn't sound very keen. Anyway, perhaps one elderly relative is to be preferred to three. He seems quite a harmless, kindly old man, and to go to Tripoli would make a change for them both," said Timothy.

"Do you think the mad Aunt Waltruda fears any particular evil eye, or is it that she takes general precautions?" asked Diana. Timothy laughed, but Alison said,

"She's not only mad; she's wicked."

"Poor old thing! You want to look at Aunt Wulfilda, you know," said Timothy.

The four set off next morning in Timothy's car, and followed the tourist route through Llangollen and Betws-y-Coed. Some miles west and north of the Swallow Falls they realized that they had lost their way.

"I think we're *here*," said Diana who had taken over the map-reading.

"We can't be," said Alison, looking over her shoulder to where she was pointing out a Roman road.

"Well, where do *you* think we are?"

"Heading for Bethesda and Bangor."

"But that's *miles* out of our way!"

"Well, we might as well get to something that's marked on the map. Then we can ask for directions."

"I knew those two women would get us lost," said Tom, who had been asleep on the back seat since lunch.

"There's gratitude for you!" said his wife. "Tim drives, we navigate, and all you can do is snore your head off and then wake up and complain. Where do *you* think we are, Timmie?"

"I haven't the foggiest, and I want my tea," Timothy sadly replied.

"Oh, well, drive on, and we'll find a spot where we can pull up," said Alison.

"With a mountain stream following the roadside on one hand, and waterfalls all the way down the mountains on the other? I vote we turn at the first possible place, and go back to Betws-y-Coed," said Tom Parsons.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed both women. "Let's go on. There's certain to be a village or a farm where we can ask the way, and perhaps get tea."

"Don't look now," said Timothy, "but there's a mist like a giantess's bride-veil rolling down over them thar hills to the right of us."

"There's a bend in the road ahead," said Diana. "Maybe there's somewhere we can park."

Once round the almost semi-circular bend, they found themselves on the shores of a small lake. Scarcely had Timothy pulled up on the stony shore, so that the car was off the road, when the mist wiped out the rest of the world and left the travellers marooned in clouds of thick, wet whiteness, a ghost-world silent and strange.

"Better wind up the driver's window," said Parsons. It was the only one open, for the spring day had been chilly. "Here we sit, like birds in the wilderness, until we get enough wind to blow this lot away. Polly, put the kettle on, and let's have tea—I *don't* think!"

"There's probably no tea nearer than Caernarvon," said Alison. "I wish there were. Tim, darling, couldn't you see whether there's anything in the boot?"

"I shall get wet," he protested; nevertheless, he uncovered his private store of beer and handed round the mugs, the bottles, and the beer-opener. The mist swirled at times, giving evidence that the air was no longer entirely still, and at the end of an hour it had begun to clear. The

time was a quarter to five, so only about two and a half hours of daylight remained.

"We're never going to get home in time for dinner," said Diana plaintively.

"Well, you've only just had what has done you more good than your tea," said her husband. "Don't act so greedy! Oh, I say! Look! Is it real, or is it a mirage born of the mist and my tottering brain?"

The car was sideways on to the shore of the lake, and ahead was a double gate. The narrow part of it, intended for foot-passengers, was wide open. The part of it which was wide enough to admit a farm wagon or a car was closed. A stony little road led up to it and continued in a curve on the other side of the fence until it was lost to sight among a thick wood of stunted oak-trees. On an eminence above the trees stood a tall, rectangular tower. Behind its high knoll rose the mountains, purple-black and menacing—a dark dream of shadowed corries and apparently unscaleable cliffs.

"That would be the place, wouldn't it?" asked Alison. "Do let's go and look! I've a feeling that, quite unwittingly, we've arrived at Castell Foel."

"You three go," said Tom Parsons. "I'm all right where I am."

"Of course you'll come! Don't be so lazy!" said his wife.

The tower was further off than they had imagined it to be. The four of them walked through the open wicket-gate and followed a stony track which the trees had hidden from view. It followed the curve of the lake until, at the iron gates of a slate-roofed house, it became a carriage-drive. A narrow path by-passed the gates, skirted the house, and led upwards and onwards to the tower.

"I think," said Timothy, halting as they began to climb the hill, "that it might make a better impression if we asked permission to proceed. We're undoubtedly trespassers, as

we were at Netherton Fivefields church. If you don't mind waiting, I will go and make an enquiry."

He left them and went back to the house. It was an unprepossessing structure, but might, he thought, be better inside than out. The door was opened by a respectable woman whose apron indicated that she was a servant.

"The master and missus are out, sir," she replied to Timothy's question, "and may not be back till late. If you wouldn't mind waiting, I'll just call my husband and see what he thinks, though I can't see any objection. No doubt you've seen the advert, sir, in the paper."

Five minutes later Timothy returned to the others.

"No objection," he said. "It's Castell Foel all right, but apparently the owners, whose name is Purlieu, like to let their house for the summer months and throw the castle in with the rest. That might suit Ryanston, but I said nothing about him because we don't know whether the castle is what he wants. The servants simply think we've seen an advertisement for letting the property during the summer months and have come to look the place over, so, later on, we're invited to see the inside of the house. I stalled a little because, if the castle's no good, I don't want them to think we'll take the house."

They followed the narrow uphill path in single file with Timothy in the lead. The way was muddy from recent rain, but the going was not unduly steep, for the path wound its way by easy gradients among dead bracken, withered heather, and stunted bushes of willow. Here and there were treacherous outcroppings of slippery rock and the rain had left frequent puddles.

At the last turn of the path were the remains of a small gate-house, but it was now no more than a roofless stone shell with about twenty feet of mouldering curtain-wall adhering to it on the left and a jumbled mass of fallen masonry to the right. A flight of steps led from the interior of the gate-house to the tower and ended in a goat-path of

weathered rocks which brought Timothy and the others to the castle walls.

It was clear that the stronghold had never been of anything but minor importance. It lacked the more complicated defences of the thirteenth century, and appeared to have been enclosed by no more than the one curtain-wall whose remains they had seen at the gate-house.

"It must be marked on the map," said Tom Parsons. "Anyway, where's the entrance?"

"That's it, in the middle of that blind arcading halfway up," said Timothy. "Look, these broken blocks mark the site of the original outside stair. If Ryanston wants to use the castle, he'll have to rebuild that, and, I expect, do some flooring inside the tower. Then he'll have to replace the battlements, I suppose. He'll need them for picturesque effect, and they're not at all pretty at present."

"Meanwhile, how do we get inside?" demanded Diana.

"By the look of things, we don't, unless the walls have been breached on one of the other three sides. Let's stroll round and take a look. There's a spiral stair, I think, inside the keep in that angle to our right. You can see where the wall's been widened and thickened," said Timothy.

"Oh, Tim, we *must* get inside. It looks most exciting," cried Diana. "Do find another way in!"

There was no other entry into the keep. A bricked-up doorway, obviously modern (on which Timothy's pocket compass indicated was the south side), offered dogged opposition to invaders.

"Wonder whether the servants at the house would lend us a ladder?" said Tom Parsons, when they had returned to the car.

"Please not!" said Diana. "It's too dangerous."

"Nonsense! We should only stand on the rungs and take a look. If there are no floors left, we couldn't go inside."

"Those walls don't look any too safe to me."

"Well, they've stood for over eight hundred years," said her husband. "That was Norman arcading, fairly late, and the windows above it are undoubtedly Norman, too. Besides, who was so anxious just now to get inside?"

"You'd never be able to bring a long ladder up that slope."

"Good gracious me! Of course we could. Come on, Tim. Let's see what we can borrow from the manservant at the house. I shan't be satisfied until I've had a look inside," said Parsons.

"Not today," said Timothy, with a glance at his silent wife. "The light's beginning to fade, so I think we'd better get back. In any case, we shall need permission from the householder before we begin climbing his walls. Then we had better bring our own ladder with us. I believe you've got one of those tubular affairs that you can joint up, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have. We can carry it on the roof of the car. It's in quite convenient sections."

"I still don't like it," said Diana. "I'm terrified of ladders."

"A Freudian complex," said her husband.

"My dear," said Alison, "if they've made up their minds to break their necks, nothing we can say is going to stop them. One thing, though: when they've satisfied their curiosity, I'm going to indulge mine. Besides, there's something in the back of my mind about the name Purlieu. It's not a very common one, and I'm sure I've heard it before. Anyway, why should men have all the fun?"

"I've often wondered," said Diana, "but they seem to."

"Only one thing puzzles me," said Tom Parsons. "Why on earth didn't you try to find a castle nearer home?"

"I was glad to hear of one near where you live, so that I could pick your brains. I guessed that a ruined castle would need an architect's eye cast over it, and some safety

measures taken, before it could be used for filming, you see," said Timothy.

"You think of everything, don't you?"

"What I do think is that Ryanston ought to be good for a nice fat fee, if he wants an architect's opinion. Don't you want to make a little money on the side?"

"Oh, I see! Do you wish me to thank you?"

"Not until the nice fat fee is forthcoming." He returned alone to the house, made the servants a small present of money, and was assured that the owners would make no objection to a closer inspection of the tower on the following day.

"Why does your friend want to include a castle in the film—and a ruined castle, at that?" asked Parsons, as they left Castell Foel for Corwen.

"I don't really know," replied Timothy. "I imagine it comes near the end of the story. Most of the action would take place in the big house, with a tenants' dance and jamboree in the barn, a seduction in the folly, a Black Mass in the ruined church, a suicide from the old bridge, and a recluse repenting in sack-cloth and ashes in the castle, where he could do a sort of Faustus or Macbeth act, and see visions, some horrific, the rest heavenly. That's the way I should work it out."

"Good Lord! I thought you said it was to be an educational film!"

"That's what I was told, but I think that was just a sop to get me to find the settings."

"Any nudes included?"

"I shouldn't think so. Ryanston is a serious thinker, I fancy. Besides, nudes are already beginning to be old hat, and no wonder. Very few carcasses look the better or the more alluring for being without clothes. When did men worship women as goddesses? Why, when they were not only covered voluminously from neck to heels and corseted to swooning point, but when they disguised their lower

portions with farthingales and crinolines and the doubtful aestheticism of the bustle. What with the mini, the maxi, the bikini, the pill, and the unisex outfits and hairstyles, the delicate and highly civilized art of seduction isn't worth the time and trouble spent on it. We live in a barbarous age, Thomas, and if this film, which is probably set in the eighteenth century, ever reaches the wide screen for which it is intended, it will merely fill the educational rôle which is scheduled for it. I hope so, anyway."

"Hm!" said Tom Parsons. "Where do we turn off after this to get back to Betws-y-Coed?"

"I can direct you," said Alison, from the back seat. "Are we really coming back all this way tomorrow?"

"You two girls needn't come, but Tom and I shall," said Timothy. "It isn't so far as all that, now we know the way."

"Tom doesn't," said Diana. "I wonder what sort of reception you'll get from the owners? Won't it be embarrassing to be shown all over the house when you don't even know whether your Mr. Ryanston will be prepared to rent it for the summer?—especially as you don't know, either, whether the castle itself will suit him."

"We shall dodge being shown over the house on a plea of having no time. I wonder what made them brick up that lower entrance?" said Timothy.

"I suppose they use the tower as a storage space."

"Then it must be something that's stored permanently. You'd need pickaxes and crowbars to take down all those hideous and incongruous bricks. If it's a store, it would surely have been more sensible to fit a wooden door. Anyway, I still don't see why a keep like that ever had a ground floor entrance."

"I don't think it had," said Parsons. "I took a pretty good look at it, and I think a breach had been made in the stonework either by time or the enemy, and that then it had been tidied up and bricked in. Well, let's hope the owners

won't mind our climbing up tomorrow and having a peep inside."

"One thing," said Alison. "I don't know what Diana will decide, but I'm coming with you, and if you're going to climb ladders and find skeletons in cupboards, or a miser's hoard, or even nothing but a heap of mangold-wurzels, I want to see it, too."

"Yes, I was afraid of that. Restrain yourself, I beg of you," said Timothy. "This is men's work."

Alison laughed and said no more, and the car continued on its way, with the two thousand feet of Foel Goch to the left of it and, far ahead, the mightier Carnedd Llywelyn, Carnedd Dafydd, and the black slate ramparts of Glyder Fawr.

On the following morning Diana elected to stay behind, and as Alison was in the minority in preferring a picnic lunch to what Tom and Timothy described as "proper food," the party ran through to Llanberis along the magnificently gloomy pass of the same name, and lunched at an hotel at the foot of Snowdon. Then they turned about and Alison guided them unfalteringly to the lake above which stood Castell Foel, that secret and so-far impregnable keep.

Here there was an unexpected snag. Timothy called at the house again to announce the presence of the invaders, and was met by apologetic but definite opposition.

"It's too dangerous," said the mistress of the house, a mild elderly woman wearing paint-stained overalls.

"I'm an architect," said Tom, who had accompanied Timothy to the front door of the house. "I know about walls and things, you know."

"Yes, yes, of course," said the owner, a grey-haired man who appeared to be in his late sixties. "We appreciate that, but . . . well, we couldn't take any responsibility, you know."

"Assuredly not," said Timothy cheerfully. "It's understood that we go at our own risk."

"Would you be prepared to sign a paper to that effect?"

“Surely that isn’t necessary?”

“We cannot guarantee that the walls are safe to climb.”

“We should be prepared to take a chance. We ought to tell you, perhaps, that we have a special object in view. It’s not entirely curiosity that makes us want to see the interior of your tower,” said Parsons. He looked at Timothy and raised interrogatory eyebrows. Timothy nodded, and took on the necessary explanations.

“I represent the Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest,” he said, producing Phisbe’s official card. “Mr. Parsons is our architect. We’ve recently been approached by Tintagel and Camelot Films to find them some settings for their forthcoming *Ballad in Silver-Grey*, for which, among other locations, they need a ruined castle. Your Castell Foel is the most likely, judging from its outward appearance, but, of course, we need to see the interior before we can give a detailed report to the producer.”

The grey-haired man pursed his lips.

“Would they be prepared to rent the castle for a period?” he asked. “We should be disturbed by their presence and ought to be compensated for that, don’t you think?”

“/ think you ought, and although I can’t make promises on their behalf, I’ve no doubt you will be able to come to terms with them if they decide to take an option on the site.”

“Do you think they might rent this house for a bit, as well as the castle, while they are filming? I think my servants told you that we usually let the property during the summer months.”

“Again, it isn’t for me to say what they will do. It might be a convenience to them to rent the whole place, of course. You could suggest it—or even make it a condition of letting them film here—but I’m afraid nothing can be settled until they get our report and then, if it is favourable, decide to act on it.”

"Quite so. Well, it all sounds very interesting, but you *will* be careful, won't you?" said the woman in the paint-stained overalls.

"For our own sakes, yes, we shall. Thank you very much for your co-operation," said Parsons.

"One more thing," said Timothy, turning back. "When was that ground-floor entrance blocked up? It looks pretty recent work to me."

"I suppose my predecessor, Leigh-Fifield, a distant relative, had it done. The brickwork looked quite new when I bought this property five years ago," said the elderly man.

"If our preliminary inspection seems promising, Mr. Purlieu, would you allow us to open the lower entrance again?"

"If you would defray the cost of doing so—pay the workmen, I mean, and block it up again later if I wished—certainly you may open it. I should be interested to see the interior, although I expect the castle is now no more than a shell."

"So you yourself have never been inside the keep?"

"No. I have no idea what the inside is like."

"Have your summer tenants never expressed any curiosity concerning it?"

"Oh, we never let the place to people with children," said Purlieu, as though this disposed of the question. "May I ask how soon you can give us an answer from the film company? Naturally, with the spring already here, we are anxious to make sure of a summer letting. It is our only chance of a holiday, you see. I write, and the rewards are—er—"

"I think you would be wise to accept another tenant, if a suitable offer is made you," said Timothy. "I wouldn't rely on the film people. A bird in the hand, don't you think?"

"Yes, I agree, but if the producer definitely wants to film the castle I could put a little extra on to the rent for that and take a little off the rent I should charge other tenants of the

house. We are not at all wealthy, as you can see. Oh, well, no, you have *not* seen, have you? Permit me to show you over the house, in case the producer—”

“I have no mandate to make a report on the house,” said Timothy. “It is not as though I have any connection with the film company that way. I’ll mention that the house is available, of course, but the producer will have to see the whole location for himself, so there really is no point in my wasting your time. May I take it that you would be prepared to rent him the castle even if he were not prepared to take the house as well?”

“That would depend upon how much rent he would pay. You see, as I say, I might have to charge my other tenants less, if they were to be cluttered up with film people all over the grounds.”

“Oh, quite. On the other hand, it might make it more exciting. Well, if you’ll excuse us,” said Parsons, “we ought to be getting back.”

“You *will* be careful, won’t you? I cannot guarantee that the walls are safe, you know.”

“Oh, it’s our risk. Please don’t worry. Thank you for allowing us the privilege,” said Timothy. “I do hope the film people will play ball with you.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Devil at Fivefields Church

“And it is full of half-heard whispers—whispers that startle—ghosts of sounds long dead.”

Ambrose Bierce—*A Tough Tussle*

“I’ll go first,” said Timothy, when they had carried the extending apparatus up the hill.

“It’s *my* ladder,” said Tom.

“I’m the lightest,” said Alison. “Tom can put his foot on the lowest rung to steady it, and Tim can catch me if I fall, but I shan’t.” Without waiting for comment or expostulation, she climbed to the round-headed opening, looked down into the basement, then craned her head to look upward at the sky through the roofless top of the tower.

“Come on down,” called Timothy, “and let the weaker sex have a go.”

“I couldn’t see all that much,” said Alison, when she had reached the ground. “Oh, you’ve brought a torch. You might have lent it to me!”

“I wanted you to hold on with both hands.” Timothy put the electric torch into his jacket pocket and mounted the ladder. “There’s an inside stair,” he called down, “but you can only see the bottom couple of treads. The rest is in the thickness of the wall, as we thought. We’ll have to get that ground-floor opening unblocked. Apart from the stair—and

goodness knows what state of repair it's in—you can see pretty well as much from the outside as from up here. There aren't any floors left, but, from the remains of stone corbels inside, I should say there must have been four storeys, so it's a tower-keep, not a hall-keep. I agree with Tom that it wasn't built with a ground-floor entrance. It would have made the castle so vulnerable. Still, it will come in handy when we get it unblocked. Before we do, though, I'd better see Ryanston and find out whether he wants us to proceed."

"If Phisbe pays for the unblocking," said Tom Parsons after he had taken his turn in climbing the ladder, "we could go ahead before you contact the film people. I don't suppose they'll be very enthusiastic about the present set-up, because, of course, they'll want to march straight in. What's more, I don't see why we shouldn't have those floors put back, and make sure that the newel stairs are safe. This is a pretty fair example of its kind, and a restoration might be interesting. Why shouldn't we bring Coningsby along to take some official photographs when we've unblocked the entrance? Then we can show the committee the results. Whether your friend wants to film here or not, there's plenty of scope and plenty of excuse for a Phisbe restoration. In fact, it could be a very interesting one, because this castle is quite different from Nanradoc, and yet quite near it."

"We shall have to get permission from the Purlieus," said Alison, "if you want to make alterations to the keep."

"Restorations, not alterations. Well, there's nothing more to do here, so let's go along and chat them up. Before we commit ourselves too far, however, we'd better find out what Ryanston thinks about all this, and then approach the committee," said Timothy.

"I don't agree," said Parsons. "If we're going to do a Phisbe restoration, the committee meeting comes first, the film people afterwards. We're not prepared to go to a lot of trouble and expense just for their benefit. We've got the Society to consider."

“Very well, then. I’ll convene a special meeting,” said Timothy. “Nobody is going to be very pleased, though, as we’ve already had the Spring session. They won’t be expecting another meeting before midsummer.”

“So long as we can get a *quorum* we shall be all right. There are the president, the treasurer, you and me and Alison, and also Lady Grace Norton. Then there are those three dear old buffers who always turn up to meetings so that they can get a weekend in Town away from their wives and families,” said Parsons. “The *quorum* is in the bag, so let’s get Coningsby down to take the official pictures, and then we can really get cracking.”

Coningsby, spectacled, young, keen, and efficient, was the only paid official connected with the Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest except for the caretakers at Phisbe’s London headquarters. He was usually referred to by Timothy as “our dogsbody,” for, in addition to being the Society’s official photographer, he was its archivist and also performed the duller secretarial duties which Timothy declined to undertake.

The Purlieus were willing for the photographs to be taken, so, after a long weekend in Shrewsbury with Tom and Diana, Timothy and Alison returned home. The committee meeting, owing to members’ commitments, was postponed, so Timothy telephoned Ryanston after all, but not before Alison said,

“I don’t see much point in telling him about Castell Foel until we know whether he wants the Netherton Fivefields locations.”

“There’s no real connection, you know. He could find manor houses, bridges, and barns (and probably follies) galore, but castles are a different matter. I admit a ruined church wouldn’t be so easy, but I daresay we could manage it with a bit of a struggle. As for Castell Foel, it’s ideal.”

“I don’t like Castell Foel very much.”

“Oh, really? Why ever not?”

"It's ugly. And those awful bricks!"

"But we're going to take the bricks away. It will look much better without them."

"I can't see why it was bricked up in the first place. Besides, there's this name Purlieu. I seem to associate it with something horrid, although I can't call anything to mind about it."

"And the goblins 'ull git yer, ef yer don't watch out!" said Timothy, laughing. Ryanston, on the telephone, seemed pleased with the report, particularly of the ruined church at Netherton Fivefields.

"I should need to look at the house and the bridge and the folly for myself," he said. "The barn sounds as though it might be all right. When could you meet me over there?"

"We'd better invite him to stay the night here," said Alison, when Timothy had asked Ryanston to hold the line, "and all drive over there together, don't you think? He'll need an introduction to Annabel and her uncle, and, anyway, it's an awkward place to find if you don't know the countryside."

Ryanston proved to be a pleasant and amusing guest. He had some good after-dinner stories about the slightly fantastic world of films and film stars, all of them suitable for Alison's ears, but, aware that the visitor wanted to talk shop with Timothy, she went to bed earlier than usual and left the two men together.

"Well, now," Ryanston said, declining a second whisky, "down to brass-tacks. Supposing this Dorset house is what we want, it means we'll have to turn the owners out while we use it. Are they aware of that? I mean, the bulk of the story will be set there, and we must have a free hand."

"They are willing to let it, I'm sure, and it's really a fine old place, and has the advantage of being all of a piece with the other locations."

"How much rent do they want?"

"I have no idea. It means, of course, that they will have to find somewhere else to live, and that will come pretty expensive for them, as it will mean staying at an hotel."

"Oh, well, I shall have to talk to them about it. What about this castle you mentioned?"

"What I've found is of interest to my Society, but I haven't the least notion whether it will be what you require. I can tell you this much: I have found a tower-keep, but it's beyond the Welsh marches, over towards Snowdonia. Before you could use it, it would have to be opened up and repaired. That's where my Society could come in. If we decide to do the work, we shall charge you for some of it, because you could not possibly use the place in its present state, but we should retain control of it in the Society's interests, so it wouldn't cost you much."

"I'd like to see it. We might only need to use it as a background. I'm not sure we'd want to pay for extensive repairs."

"Oh well, in that case, we could postpone our restoration until you'd finished your filming. That might suit us very well. Look here, we'll go over to Netherton Fivefields, as we've arranged, and then, if you'd like to put in another night here, I could take you to Castell Foel on the following day."

"What is he *really* like?" asked Alison, who was still awake when Timothy came upstairs.

"Ryanston? He's all right. Went to Stowborough and Queen's."

"So that settles it?"

"Well, on the whole, yes. Very respectable and nice. Very much the business man, but at least he puts his cards on the table. Why aren't you asleep?"

"I hoped you'd tell me some of his stockbroker stories."

Timothy chuckled and went into his dressing-room.

"They weren't too bad, as a matter of fact," he said from there. "It takes a Jew to tell good stories against the

Jews. We're going to Netherton Fivefields tomorrow, and I'm taking him to look at Castell Foel the next day. You don't mind having him here for another night, do you?"

"'H for Windsor; all right, go along, Bob.'"

"Hey! Where did you find that one?"

"Don't tell me I'm a quotation ahead of you at last!"

"No, we're level. I seem to remember trying you with 'As for myself, I never had the courage to get into debt.' You couldn't place it, so I had to tell you. I hope you looked it up."

"I did. You owe me thirty bob, or, in present parlance, pounds one fifty."

"The devil I do! Why?" asked Timothy, reappearing ready for bed.

"Because my quotation comes from Nimrod's *Life of a Sportsman*, and so did yours."

"Damn! I ought to have recognized it. I do now. The Eton boys losing their way in Windsor Great Park. Double or quits if you can or cannot fox me again from the same noble work."

"No; you pay up, as a gentleman should."

"Will you take an I.O.U.?"

"No. Payment on the dot is my motto."

"All right. Put out the light, then. Here it comes!" He slid into bed beside her.

"I didn't say I'd take payment in kind!" protested Alison.

"That's all right. This is only the interest on the debt"—he gathered her into his arms—"so now park prettily, as they say at the classier pubs."

The weather was less kind on the journey to Netherton Fivefields than it had been on their previous visits. Before they got into the car a sharp Spring rain was blowing in a north-east wind, and by the time they reached Fordingbridge the wind had freshened, the rain was heavier,

and the river was whipped into myriads of tiny whirlpools as the heavy rain-storm battered the surface of the water.

"Let's stop for coffee," suggested Alison. "We can't explore the ruins in this."

"Coffee, by all means," said Timothy, "but if the rain keeps on, I think, Ryanston, you'd better admire the ruins from the interior of the car, and then I'll drive you to the barn. After you've looked at that from the same sheltered vantage point, we'll see the bridge and then go up to the house. I can't drive you as far as the folly, because there's nothing but a footpath. You can see the top from the church, but nothing more. I'm sorry it's such a filthy morning. I'm afraid we're going to waste a lot of your time."

After Fordingbridge came the devious little roads, full of bends and ups and downs, now skirting woods, now fields, now open heath, which led at last to the ruined church. The rain was still coming down, but far more steadily, for the wind had dropped a little. All the same, Ryanston's first glimpse of the church was a more extraordinary one than any of the party had suspected it might be.

Perambulating the building, and keeping carefully to the banking of the inner ditch of the prehistoric site, was a strange procession. In the lead was a woman dressed in a long white macintosh. She was leading a black cat whose leather collar was fastened to the belt of her coat on the end of a long piece of string, and as she walked she was rhythmically waving her arms. Behind her plodded a docile black and white Friesian cow, and behind the cow came a spotted black and white Dalmatian. To the dog's collar was tied a piece of rope and on the other end of this danced a piebald filly foal, tossing her young head and occasionally kicking up her heels, but otherwise making no attempt to do other than follow the dog. Of Boris, the beautiful borzoi, there was no sign.

"Good gracious, Herring!" exclaimed Ryanston, as Timothy stopped the car. "What on earth is going on here?"

"I will hazard a guess that it is Miss Waltruda Netherton-Leigh carrying out another of her ancient rites," said Timothy, taking out his field-glasses and training them on the scene.

"*Now* what about the bunches of sage and the Evil Eye?" demanded Alison.

Timothy put away his field-glasses and drove on, but halted again at the end of the lane which led to the ruined church.

"Can you see well enough from here?" he asked his guest. "Or are you going to brave the rain and take a closer look?"

"I'd like to go inside the church, if we shan't disturb the old lady."

"Let's chance it. I'll edge up as close as I can to the gate, and then we'll cross over the inner bank as soon as her procession has gone by. That way, I think we can nip into the church without upsetting her ritual. As you can see, she has her peculiarities. Are you coming with us, Alison? I should stay in the dry if I were you."

"I'd sooner neither of you came with me, if you don't mind," said Ryanston. "I'd rather brood apart for a while." He huddled himself into a belted waterproof, pulled on a tweed hat of the kind which fishermen wear, and got out of the car as soon as Timothy pulled up at the latched gate. Waltruda and her procession were just disappearing round the west end of the church. Ryanston dashed across the rough grass, hoping, no doubt, that he would be able to slip into the building without interfering with the crazy but solemn ceremony which was being carried out round the exterior of the ruined and solitary shell, and ran to the only opening.

It was the foal, flirting about on the end of its long rope, which first became aware of him. It pranced and whinnied, then the dog barked, and Waltruda, side-stepping the cow, which remained unaffected by the general excitement,

stood waiting for the intruder to come up. When he did, she threw herself on the ground and embraced his ankles with such fervour that he almost lost his balance.

"Master! Master!" she moaned. "You have come at last!"

"I say," said Ryanston, who was not only understandably taken aback by this demonstration, but had an atavistic allergy to the mentally afflicted, "do, please, get up, madam! You'll get so wet and dirty down there!"

Instead of listening to this pleading advice, Waltruda laid her head on his shoes and began to croon some meaningless jumble and jingle of words to a cracked, unrecognizable tune. Ryanston, with a mixture of repulsion and embarrassment, yelled at the very top of his voice for help, and Timothy, guessing the cause of the panic, since to him and Alison the procession had not reappeared, came running round to the south door.

"Oh, Lord!" he said. He put his hands on the elderly woman's elbows and pulled her on to her feet.

"Now, now," he said. "You had better go home, Miss Waltruda. You're wet and muddy, and that cat of yours will get pneumonia if you don't look out. Now do be a dear good lady, and do as I say. You've embarrassed poor Mr. Ryanston. He only came to look at the church. Whatever is all this nonsense?"

"He's the Devil," said Waltruda, making a sign to avert the Evil Eye. "I call him Master, but he is black and cruel. He torments me. He is Beelzebub. He took Erik and Boris, and one day he will take me."

"Not yet, anyway," said Timothy. Out of the corner of his eye he had seen Ryanston slip away into the church, and he wondered how long it would take him to make his survey. He also wondered whether he ought to offer to drive Miss Waltruda home, and whether, if he did so, she would insist upon keeping the cat and the dog with her. Both, like

herself, were soaking wet, and he was not very anxious to have them in the car.

At this opportune moment Alison came running up to them and said,

“Miss Waltruda, Annabel is here. She’s come to take you home, so you must just come along with me. We mustn’t keep her waiting, must we? And you are extremely wet. We don’t want you catching cold.”

“Well,” said Ryanston, when they were driving towards the by-road which led to the farm-track and the barn, “I hope the rest of the family are not too much like that one! What did she mean—I was the Devil? Surely I don’t look as sinister as that, do I?”

“Well,” said Alison, turning her head to look at him, “no, you don’t appear in the least what I would call sinister, but there is something—how shall I put it? I don’t want to give a wrong impression.”

“Better not put it at all, perhaps,” said Timothy. “Those who say they don’t want to give a wrong impression end up by being plain rude.”

“Perhaps a more kindly paraphrase of something my wife once said to me would meet the case,” said Ryanston, smiling. He had very even, small white teeth and a slightly saturnine expression.

“You’re married, then?” said Alison. She glanced at her husband and her lips formed the word, “Glutz.”

“Since I was nineteen. I have three children—two sons and a daughter,” said Ryanston.

“How lovely!” said Alison, looking again at Timothy. “What *was* it your wife once said to you?”

“Oh, something to the effect that with my goat’s foot I could dance the antic hay. Except that I know it was intended to be insulting, I haven’t a clue what she meant.”

“That you impressed her as a dancing faun, perhaps,” said Timothy, grinning.

“Oh, well,” said Alison, “you’ve no need to worry, Mr. Ryanston. Wicked old Waltruda probably thinks that any dark stranger she meets must be the Devil. Tim, dear, the rain is easing off. I believe we’ll be able to walk up to the folly after all. I told Annabel you’d call at the house after lunch, if Mr. Ryanston had any questions to ask, but not to expect you later than half-past three. Is that all right, do you think?”

Timothy looked at his watch.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “We’ll go to the bridge and then take a look at the barn, and then have lunch. What is the significance of the folly in your film, by the way, Ryanston? Is it very important? Ought we to see it before lunch?”

“We want to use it as a place of assignation, and perhaps have a duel fought outside its walls, that’s all. It will do perfectly well after lunch. I just need permission to use it,” Ryanston replied. The bridge was on the outskirts of the village and to reach it they drove four or five miles along a secondary road along both sides of which the rain had formed fast-moving brooks. The last mile was through deciduous woods whose trees were already in leaf. The rain eased off as the car came out upon a stretch bordered by fields and hedges and crossed a road-bridge, and, on the further side of this, Timothy pulled up.

“Is this the bridge you meant?” asked Ryanston.

“No, not this one. It’s modern, as you can see. I’m afraid we’ll have to walk to the one I’d thought of. It isn’t far.”

To reach the mediaeval bridge he and Alison had already seen, they climbed a stile and followed a muddy path beside the river. A little further on there was a ruined mill. Its wheel, out of use for many years, was overgrown with weeds. The stream itself was weedy, but the shallow water was clear and ran on a bed of gravel. After the first bend they came upon the bridge. It carried a road which was little more than a cattle drive, but its three arches were well-proportioned and, in former times, as Timothy had

thought when Annabel had guided him and Alison to it by the longer route, it had once spanned a mightier stream, as the presence of the millwheel attested.

None of the party spoke while Ryanston inspected the bridge. He studied it from the bank on which he stood, walked beyond it so that he could see the other side, crossed over it and studied it again, and then stood in the middle, looking first over one parapet and then over the other, as he assessed the value to his art of the modest little river. Still silent, the party returned to the car and Timothy drove to the vast and empty barn. It was in bad repair, but its timber roof was worthy of a mediaeval manorial hall and dated originally, Timothy thought, from the first half of the fifteenth century. It was of simple arch-brace construction, its wall-plates were based on rubble plinths, and its rafters—those which did not need replacement—were magnificent. Its proportions, too, were good, and although the floor was of beaten earth it was as flat as though it had been tiled.

“Well,” said Ryanston, “*that* is much better than anything I could have hoped for. We can easily tart up the decayed bits, and it’s a splendid size. The bridge I’m not so sure about. We need it for an attempted suicide. Only ‘attempted,’ because we’re actually going to have a happy ending. Most unfashionable, until we set the fashion, which I hope we shall. I’m all for innocence, kindness, and romance, and it’s time they made a comeback. Of course, at present, you can only introduce them into a costume drama, as we’re planning to do, but the stuff may clean up later. I don’t think present trends will last much longer, as a matter of fact. There’s nothing so boring as pornography, once it isn’t actually forbidden. If marriage were ever proscribed, everybody would enjoy it ever so much more than they do at present, and divorce would be almost unthinkable.”

“And bang would go the prosperity of the town of Reno,” said Alison. Her husband’s mind was differently occupied.

"If the Netherton bridge won't do," said Timothy, "there are plenty of old bridges round and about. You can take your pick from those at Blandford, Sturminster Newton, Spetisbury, Wimborne, Fordingbridge, Wareham . . ."

"Oh, yes, there's no need to be worried about the bridge," said Alison.

"Quite. I'm most grateful. Well, I'm certainly not worried about the folly, so long as we can get inside it, and you say we can, so we need not bother with that today. The two most important locations, however, remain undecided, and they concern me very much."

"Well, you'll be able to make up your mind about the mansion this afternoon, I hope, and we'll push over to Castell Foel tomorrow, if that will suit you," said Timothy, settling his wife in the car. They drove off for lunch and then made the return journey to Netherton Fivefields and Fivefield Hall.

They were met at the front door by Annabel, who had followed the servant along the double hall and was there to receive them.

"I've sent the three old dears up to their rooms," she said, "so you've got a clear field. I suppose you'll only need to see the downstairs part of the house, won't you?"

Ryanston took some papers out of his brief-case.

"The script calls for a drawing-room, a large bedroom, a boudoir, a grand staircase, a terrace, a formal garden, and a summer-house," he said.

"You could turn the dining-room into a splendid bedroom, if you hired some stage furniture," said the owner of the house, "and Uncle's study could be the boudoir. We've got the other bits and pieces, too. The summer-house is a bit tatty, but you could fix that, or even build another one. Come along, and I'll show you what I mean. You don't have to make up your mind today, of course. I expect you'll need time to think it over."

“I hope Miss Waltruda will take no harm from getting so wet,” said Timothy, as they followed the girl through the archway and stood back while Ryanston contemplated the splendid stair.

“Aunt Waltruda?” said Annabel, laughing. “Only the devil himself could bring any harm to that one!”

“What’s come over her?” said Alison, when the girl had taken Ryanston into the garden to look at the summer-house. “She seems most cheerfully in command of the situation. ‘Sent the three old dears up to their rooms’ indeed! Wonders will never cease!”

“Yes, she seems to be mistress in her own house, doesn’t she?” said Timothy. “I wonder what can have happened?”

“I wonder what’s happened to Boris, too,” said Alison. “He was quite the nicest thing in that beastly house.”

CHAPTER SIX

The Missing Heiress

"Romira, stay, And run not thus like a young roe
away."

John Hall of Durham—*The Call*

"I thought perhaps the distance between Castell Foel and the Netherton Fivefields sites would put him off, and it has," said Timothy, when their guest, with profuse thanks, had declined an invitation to stay another night. "I suppose transport, and so on, would pose too big a problem even for a film unit."

"But he's going to rent Netherton Fivefields, the house, the barn, the bridge, the church, the folly, Old Uncle Tom Cobleigh and all, so Annabel will be pleased," said Alison. "I'm pleased, too, because, unless the committee turns us down, we can now begin the restoration of Castell Foel as soon as ever we like, and free of all commitments to Mr. Ryanston."

"That's a mercy, anyway. All the same, I suppose it's up to me to find Ryanston another castle."

This, however, proved unnecessary. Ryanston telephoned on the following morning to say that he had decided to abandon the idea of introducing a castle into his film, and would concentrate the whole of the action in and around Netherton Fivefields, including, with the help of

some *tromp l'oeil* work with the cameras, shots of its inadequate bridge. He also named a fee for Timothy's services which made Alison gasp.

"On the strength of that, when I pass the money on to our treasurer," said Timothy, "I think I'll frighten him into a fit by claiming expenses. Time, petrol, lunches, and entertainment. Why should we give all that for nothing? When do you want to see Castell Foel again?"

"Let's wait until after the committee meeting. It's only a few days ahead. I didn't know you ever claimed expenses from Phisbe."

"I don't usually get paid for my services to it, do I?"

"Oh, I think you ought to claim. I didn't mean you shouldn't."

"All right. When I've been thrown the largesse we'll go halves."

The committee met on the following Wednesday and consisted of those members whose attendance had been prophesied by Parsons, and the president got the meeting under way with as little delay as possible. The official photographs of Castell Foel were produced, together with written permission from the Purlieus for the work to be carried out, and, except for an anguished enquiry about probable cost from the treasurer to which nobody could supply an answer, the vote to restore the lone keep to its former proportions was carried with acclamation.

"That's all very well," said the treasurer to Timothy, when the meeting was over and the members were enjoying a cup of tea in the basement kitchen of Phisbe's London home, "but I still don't know whether we can afford it." As Phisbe's endowments and income were known to be substantial, Timothy greeted this jeremiad with unkind laughter and a hearty slap on the treasurer's middle-aged back.

"Archer is the oddest fellow," he said to Alison on their homeward journey, as he swung the car over Hammersmith bridge. "You'd think Phisbe was perpetually on the rocks, to hear him talk."

"Perhaps he's the reason Phisbe *isn't* on the rocks," said Alison. "Who can find a virtuous treasurer, for his price is above rubies. The heart of his committee shall safely trust in him, so that it hath no need of spoil. He will do it good, and not evil, all the days of his treasurership. Why are we going this way, please?"

"Because we have been invited to spend the night with my adored Sabrina. She wants to see you again. Bless her, then, with wished sight, goddess excellently bright."

"She isn't making awful plans for us, is she?"

"Her last awful plan was your fault, not mine. I rang her up to ask what she knew about the Leighs, the Netherton-Leighs, the Leigh-Fifields, and the Purlieus. She said that it was much too long a story to tell me over the telephone, hence the kind invitation, with a rider to the effect that it was months since she'd seen you."

"What made you ask about the Leighs and the others?"

"Just sheer ornery curiosity, that's all. As Annabel went to the school, I thought we might get the low-down on the family."

Alison said no more; she seldom talked very much while they were travelling. Timothy said it was because she did not trust his driving, but the truth was that, in spite of a satisfactory marriage, she was still reserved and solitary at times, and enjoyed those periods when she could retire into herself and think her own thoughts, and this happened only on long journeys with Timothy driving the car or when she lay awake, as she often did, after he was asleep. They had passed Guildford and were crossing the Hog's Back before she spoke again.

"Are we making a long hop of it, or do we stop for dinner?"

“Why, are you hungry?”

“Not in the least, but you’ve only had a cup of tea and a biscuit since lunch, and I don’t think you ought to drive as far as Peterminster on that.”

“All right. We’ll go by way of Salisbury and dine at that place by the river. We can look at the reflection of the lights in the water and feel ourselves secure in the shadow of the Cathedral, even though we’ll have to eat indoors at this time of year.”

“It’s too romantic a spot for an old married couple.”

“Oh, I don’t know. ‘We love, and have our love rewarded.’”

“I’m glad you think so. The second shepherd said, ‘We love, and are no whit regarded.’”

“Meaning *you*—or *me*?—Better not answer that, perhaps. Shall I pollute the air with song? ‘Haste you, sad notes, fall at her flying feet! There, wrapped in cloud of sorrow, pity move, and tell the ravisher of my soul I perish for her love.’”

Alison smiled and said,

“All right, I take back my last remark. Instead I’ll say,

“‘Who hath the hand which without stroke
subdueth?

Who long dead beauty with increase
reneweth?

To you, to you, all song of praise is due . . .’

“So now you can smirk if you want to, because I’m afraid I almost mean it.”

“Well!” said Timothy. “As I believe that’s the first kind word I’ve ever had from you, I think it should be recognised in a fitting manner. Tonight, in Salisbury, you shall choose the wine at dinner. You can’t, but you shall. So what about that?”

"Then you'd better telephone P.-B. and tell her we're delayed *en route* and are spending the night in Salisbury. I don't think I want you driving along dark and devious byways after you've drunk a wine of my choosing."

"Maybe you're right. 'For he on honey-dew hath fed, and drunk the milk of Paradise.' So be it. My adored Sabrina must do without us tonight. Salisbury, here we come! 'A bed, a bed, Clerk Saunders said, a bed for you and me.'"

"You sound completely inebriated, so stop quoting. Anyway, Margaret's reply doesn't make sense for *us*, does it?"

"No, heaven be praised, it does *not*. Still, he overruled her, you know. I never tried that before we were married, did I? I wonder what you'd have said?"

"As I can't imagine you would even have *thought* of trying it, for you have the instincts, if not the manners, of a gentleman, the question doesn't arise. Besides, in Clerk Saunders' case, the results were disastrous, weren't they?"

"So perhaps I was not only gentlemanly but wise. Oh, well, you never know, do you?"

"I'm glad you didn't turn up last night," said Miss Pomfret-Brown, after she had greeted them and supplied them with sherry. "Had my hands full."

"Juvenile delinquency?" asked Timothy.

"Don't have juvenile delinquents in my school. No garden is ever the better for weeds. No. Had Annabel Leigh here. Gal was in a fine old state. Begged me to ask you to think twice before you wished some castle or other on to a film company. Quite beside herself. Told her you were callin' and that I'd look into the thing with you. What's it all about? Connects with your wantin' to know all about her family and its collaterals, eh?"

"I suppose so." Timothy glanced at Alison. "As you gathered from my telephone call, we've been to Netherton

Fivefields, and our visit *was* connected with a film company. Except that it must be pretty dull there for a lively young woman, the set-up seemed averagely normal, in spite of the fact that it includes a batsy aunt and an aged great-uncle who wants to go to Tripoli."

"Yes," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "Met 'em both on one occasion while the gal was at school here. Cranks, as you say, but harmless. One was concerned to know whether I practised exorcism, and the other wanted to dig up the lawn to find a Roman temple. Or am I thinkin' of two other people? Have some more sherry and tell me a tale to freeze me blood."

"I wish we could," said Timothy, "but it seems much more likely to be the other way round. What did Annabel say about the castle last night?"

"She was incoherent, I thought. Rated her soundly, but without much effect. What have you two been up to?"

Timothy told her the tale simply, truthfully, and without embellishments.

"So she need not worry about the film people, although we're going to take another look at the castle," he said in conclusion. "I'm rather glad Ryanston doesn't want to use it. It means we can take our time over the restoration. Anyway, I'll write and reassure Annabel Leigh. Did she, incoherent or not, supply any sort of chapter and verse to her warnings about the film company?"

"Some nonsense about an ancient curse. I gathered that the castle is shut up and that nobody has been inside it for years."

"No, I don't suppose anybody has. It possesses a blocked-up ground-floor entrance, but otherwise is a castle of early date. It's Norman and, I should say, built by an English baron, not a Welsh prince. It reminds me strongly of Saint Leonard's Tower at West Malling in Kent, although it's higher and, as I say, it's got this bricked-up ground-floor

entrance, but we've had permission from the owners to open it."

"It don't belong to the Leighs, then?"

"I don't think it ever did. The owners were the Leigh-Fifields. Some people named Purlieu have it now. Apparently it was sold to them, together with an ugly, smallish modern house. We may possibly rent the house when we've begun work on the castle. The Purlieus were hoping the film company would take it over for three months or so during the summer, and I wouldn't be a bit surprised if permission to restore the castle is tied up with taking a short lease of the house. However, that we shall find out tomorrow."

"Not tomorrow," pronounced Miss Pomfret-Brown firmly. "Tomorrow you and Alison are goin' to judge the inter-House drama competition. Each House presents two offerings. One is a well-known one-act play; the other is a mime made up by the gals themselves."

"Good Lord! Can't Alison go it on her own?"

"No, she certainly can't!" said his wife. "I don't know the first thing about judging acting and elocution. It would be far more to the point if *you* did it on your own. I don't suppose for a moment that we should agree upon the best performance."

"That don't matter a bit," said the headmistress. "I shall be there to give a castin' vote if necessary."

"What happens if neither of us chooses the play which *you* think the best one?" asked Alison.

"Don't raise naughty issues. As in *Alice in Wonderland*, everybody gets a prize, anyway."

Accustomed to Miss Pomfret-Brown's enlightened although sometimes unfathomable methods of running her school, Alison made no comment, but Timothy, attuned to the more robust atmosphere of male competitiveness, asked, with deceitful innocence,

"Then what is the point of putting up one lot against another?"

"Because," said Miss Pomfret-Brown solemnly, "the *gals* know who's won, even if *we* don't."

"It sounds a godlike attribute on their part."

"Oh, well, trailin' clouds of glory, don't you know. What did you make of Miss Wulfilda?"

"Nothing in particular, except that she's a bit of a tartar. I was far more interested in the obviously crazy Miss Waltruda."

"Nevertheless, Samivel my son, bevare of the vidders."

"*Is* she a widow? I had no idea!"

"One of the most lethal creatures of the animal kingdom is known as The Widow, Timothy Herring. That was what I meant. Miss Wulfilda is *not* married."

"As always, my Egeria, you terrify and confuse me."

"About time, too. How're you treatin'Alison?"

"I clothe her, feed her, warm her, like it says in the hymn."

"You've got it in the wrong order, so don't tell me you can quote! Anyway, you just remember that there's always a job for her here, if she wants it. You ain't the only pebble on the beach."

"Sell my wife into slavery? What do you take me for?"

"Same as I did at the beginnin'. You ain't too bad, on the whole. Knew the first time I saw you that you were the one for her. Said so, didn't I? Think I'll go with you tomorrow to look at this fortress. Interestin', is it? Apart from filmin' it, I mean."

"That has yet to be proved. I'd love you to come. It's called Castell Foel, and it belongs to these people called Purlieu."

"That's interestin'. Got a gal here—Oh, bother it. That's the house telephone," suddenly exclaimed Miss Pomfret-Brown. "Wish they'd deal with things themselves!" She listened to the intercom, made some noises indicative of incredulity, and then said, turning to Timothy, "That wretched little Purlieu has absconded. Gal I was just goin' to

mention. Run away, don't you know. Scarpered, as the criminal classes put it. What will the little fatheads think of next? Better go and see what's up, I suppose. See you later."

"So there's a Purlieu at the school. That's interesting," said Timothy to Alison, when their hostess had left them. "Could that mean she lives at Castell Foel?"

"The people at Castell Foel seemed too elderly to have a daughter of school age," objected Alison.

"Oh, one can't dogmatize about that, can one?"

"Oh, well, perhaps they are the grandparents. I remember the child coming here, now it's been mentioned, but I didn't know where she lived, and I never thought of connecting her with *our* Purlieus, although I knew the name."

"Did many of the young damsels abscond in your time?"

"Good heavens, no! I should think this is the first time it's ever happened. Didn't you notice what a flap P.-B. was in?"

"Wonder whether there's any connection between this getaway and Annabel Leigh's visit?"

"Oh, dear! Yes, I suppose there might be. The families may know one another, because of the sale of the Welsh property. Didn't the Purlieus buy it from the Leigh-Fifields, whoever *they* are?"

"Well, first things first," said Miss Pomfret-Brown on her return, "and the first thing, as I see it, is not to ruin the drama festival. Of course, the school is agog, as you'd expect, but I'm not goin' to allow one naughty little runaway to mess everything up, so tomorrow we shall entertain the parents, as usual, to—"

"A feast of reason and a flow of soul," said Timothy.

"—to *Between the Soup and the Savoury*, as imagined by Shaftesbury House; to *Campbell of Kilmhor*—Dorchester House has a Highland housemistress; to *The Grand Cham's*

Diamond, as envisaged by Wimborne House; to the openin' scene of *Saint Joan*, as rendered by Sherborne House—'

"By the way," said Alison, "I ought not to be one of the judges. I shall have to declare an interest. I might seem to be biased. The girls who were in the middle school in my time won't have left yet, and they'll remember that Sherborne used to be *my* House."

"Hey!" objected Timothy. "I'm not going it alone!"

"Alison," said Miss Pomfret-Brown, "will not be accused of bias. As a matter of fact, she'd have done very well on the stage herself, had she been a little more self-confident."

"She certainly possesses a beautiful speaking voice," said Timothy. "Apart from those unfathomable eyes, it's the chief thing I noticed about her when we met—apart from the lack of self-confidence aforesaid, but I found that rather attractive."

"Oh?" said Alison. "That's the first time I knew that your earliest impression of me was in any way favourable. I'd always thought the reverse."

"Why?"

"Oh, just a feeling I had."

"Banish it. What are you going to do, my dear Sabrina, about this girl who's added herself to the List of Missing Persons?"

"My name, you jackanapes, is Flora."

"I ought to have known. 'Sweet flowers, that I could gallant it as you.'"

"I've no doubt you can, but are you able to 'be as little vain'? Anyway, why Sabrina? Some piece of impudence, I don't doubt."

"At our first meeting you told me that you and my father were accustomed to sit together under the glassy, cool, translucent wave (of the Cherwell, if I remember rightly), you knitting your amber-dropping hair with lilies, he, no doubt a scaly Triton, 'winding shell,' unless he was being a soothsaying Glaucus. I certainly wouldn't put that past him,

although I trust the soothsaying embodied nothing improper.”

“You’re incorrigible,” said Miss Pomfret-Brown. “I wonder, Alison, that you haven’t brought him to a better state of mind.”

“If he’s incorrigible, I don’t stand much chance, do I? Why haven’t you included something modern among those one-act plays?”

“Oh, my dear! You should have seen the implications in some of the things they wanted to do, especially your naughty little Sherborne hussies! Well, they’ll have to make do with being able to shout ‘backside’ in public. Shaw’s script allows for that, and in 1920 I suppose it was going pretty far—almost as far as that bloody little Cockney gal in *Pygmalion*. Anyway, it’s quite far enough for *me*, in front of an audience of parents!”

“Yes, I’m inclined to agree. And anyway ultra-modern stuff is so badly constructed. Well, as Tim says, what *are* you going to do about the Purlieu child?”

“I’ve telephoned her home in Wales—this castle of yours, I suppose. She ain’t there. Told them to ring me at once if or when she arrives. I expect that’s where she’s headin’ for. Shall call a Staff Meetin’ as soon as the afternoon games are over, and find out whether she’s in trouble over work or conduct. Then I suppose I’ll begin to rake over anything the other gals can tell me. After that, if she don’t show up, or if we can’t trace her, it means the police. Can’t take any chances with a gal of seventeen. *In loco parentis*, and all that sort of thing, you know. Well, come along and have some lunch.”

Miss Pomfret-Brown retained the whole of one downstairs wing of the fine Georgian mansion for her own use as a flat and took care that over her head there were nothing noisier than staff cubicles and a large room which was used for junior and middle-school prep. Her dining-room looked out towards the hills and was beautifully furnished with a

Chippendale table and half a dozen George II Gainsborough chairs.

“What have you done with the Elizabethan table and the fald-stools?” asked Alison, who, as a member of the senior staff (owing to having gained a formidable First and also the right to put F.R.Hist.S. after her name) had been invited to end-of-term parties in the room.

“Sold ’em, my dear. Got a wonderful offer, and prefer the comfort of these chairs to the stools. Nice, ain’t they? Not really meant for dinin’-chairs, of course, but I like ’em. Got my eye on an Adam sideboard—elegant and very lovely. Catalogue calls it a sideboard, but actually it’s a servin’-table. Comes up for auction on Wednesday. I’ve put my own figure on it, and I don’t think I’ll get it for less. The wood is all of a piece with what’s here—mahogany, you know. Old-fashioned enough not to care about mixin’ walnut or oak in the same room with mahogany. Walnut, anyway, I find a bit fanciful. It’s what I call a pretty wood. Don’t care much for prettiness. Pretty gals nearly always tiresome.”

“I don’t find them so,” said Timothy.

“You don’t have to teach ’em and you didn’t marry one,” retorted the formidable lady, looking approvingly at Alison, whom some people might almost consider plain, but who possessed a strange, individual beauty of the kind that a painter might appreciate, and which had always fascinated the discriminating Timothy.

“Thank you!” said Alison, laughing. “I’m afraid he’s given up any hopes he might have had that his ugly duckling might one day turn into a swan.”

“Vicious creatures, swans,” said Miss Pomfret-Brown.

“You won’t mind judging this wretched one-act play competition on your own, will you?” asked Alison, when, at just after midnight, they were lying in an Elizabethan four-poster bed.

"You're really backing out?"

"Oh, I most certainly am. Justice must not only be done; it must be seen to be done."

"What about this Purlieu kid?"

"I expect she's run home, away from some sort of trouble at school, although there used to be a rumour about her—oh, well, I hope she doesn't thumb lifts from lorry-drivers, that's all."

"Or private cars, either, come to that, but it's a pretty far cry from Peterminster—"

"Monkshood Mill, actually."

"—to Carmarthenshire, and she may not have enough money to pay a railway fare."

"Not to mention that the nearest station to the school is seven or eight miles away."

"Oh, well, it's not our headache, thank the Lord! Is Sabrina taking it as casually as she seems to be?"

"No. As I told you, she's in an awful flap. She's had all the cars the staff can muster searching the countryside all the afternoon and evening."

"But with no result, one gathers. We've been with her ever since lunch, more or less, and no information seems to have been handed in."

"The Purlieus may have telephoned, of course, by now."

"Reverting to our former topic, why do you think you might appear to be biased in your judgment of these perishing plays?"

"Because my old lot are doing the first scene from *Saint Joan*, and you simply can't go wrong with it, so they're bound to be given first place, and, that being so, I don't want to be one of the judges."

"Oh, nonsense! The steward nearly always over-acts."

"Not if the play is properly produced. Besides, it's a throw-away bit, and it's meant to be played as farce. The whole scene is intended as a kind of dam-buster, and schoolgirls can do it if they're coached. When the piece was

first put on, people expected either complete iconoclasm or else a rather sickly 'holier than thou' with a horrid ending. What they *didn't* expect—even knowing what they did about Shaw's work—were Robert de Baudricourt, the steward, and the magic eggs."

"That's another thing."

"What is?"

"Them eggs. Now, when I first saw the play performed, I shouted with mirth when Robert, confronted by the eggs, becomes convinced that Joan *did* come from God, but the audience obviously wanted it played straight, if you'll believe me, and the woman next to me was so overcome by the 'miracle' that she burst into a quasi-religious emotional sob, which struck me as being definitely out of place and shook me no little."

"Well, there *were* the loaves and fishes, you know. Besides, what did the Archbishop say?"

"In connection with what?"

"In connection with miracles."

"Well, he was quite right, of course. A miracle *may* create faith, but the fact that the hens, having conserved their energies for a time, suddenly began laying, wasn't a miracle. It was a naughty old Shavian jest."

"Well, isn't that just what I'm saying?"

"No, that it isn't—not by a long chalk. You said . . ."

"I said it was meant to be played as farce."

"Yes, but you also said it was throw-away stuff. It isn't. It's a crafty way of gripping the attention of the audience right from the start. That 'what do you mean by no eggs' bit comes straight from Greek comedy and has been music-hall stuff ever since. As for schoolgirls and coaching, no amount of coaching is going to make a female kid into de Baudricourt or de Poulengy, so I shall knock marks off Sherborne House for a bad choice of play. That ought to cut the cackle."

"Then what about Campbell and the loathsome little toad Mackenzie?"

"If the housemistress has any sense, she'll take Campbell upon herself. If she's a Scot, she was probably educated in Edinburgh."

"Glasgow University, actually."

"Better still. Did *you* ever take part in one of these binges? I had no idea you could act. Why have you kept this aspect of your genius a secret from me?"

"I once did Millament in *The Way of the World*, but it wasn't a school production. P.-B. saw it, that's all."

"So *that's* why you talk about 'dwindling into a wife!' You know, these are depths which I never suspected. Tom Parsons said that you were a *femme fatale* . . ."

"He never did!"

"I assure you. It was when he first met you, all those months and months ago. I remember it distinctly."

"I hope he's revised his opinion."

"*My* opinion is that you are a *femme incomprise*."

"How clever of me! But, loth as I am to abandon this fascinating subject, let us turn to another. How would it be if, while you are judging the drama competition, I drove over to have a talk with the people at Castell Foel?—that is, if there's still no news of Jennifer Purlieu."

"Assuming that they are the grandparents?"

"Yes. I could go as P.-B.'s emissary, you see, because I used to be on the staff. There must be some family reason why she's run off, as she doesn't seem to be in any trouble at school."

"I suggest, probably *ad nauseam*, that it isn't our pigeon. You're not on the staff any longer, and Sabrina may not want you butting in."

"That's a horrid way to put it. I'll tell you something about young Jennifer Purlieu which might make you think differently about butting in, as you call it. I knew the name Purlieu rang a bell as soon as I heard it. The girl is a very

considerable heiress, and there's a fine old family feud going on about the family fortune. We heard all about it when the child first came to the school. I remember it perfectly well, now I come to think. We were told to be on the alert, because there was just a chance that her divorced mother, who was not given custody, might try to kidnap her. At least, that's the story as I remember it."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Aftermath of a Play

"But once the circle got within,
The charms to work do straight begin."

Michael Drayton—*The Court of Fairy*

"Nonsense!" said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "Of course you're not going to drive to Castell Foel. I won't hear of it, understand?"

"Have you heard from the grandparents?"

"Rang 'em up again last night and first thing this morning. They know nothing."

"When Jennifer first came to school you had us all together and told us to keep our eyes open, as her mother might try to swoop on her."

"That's what may have happened. Hope it is. At least we'll be sure the child is safe. The family can fight its own legal battles without involvin' the school. Trouble is, she's been here five years now, and the mother hasn't made a sign."

"Is the father alive?"

"I don't know. Fees are paid by the lawyers. I'm in touch with them, as well as with the grandparents."

"What do they have to say?"

"They have the mother's last address, but have never heard from her, so far as I know, or from the father, either."

"If the father is alive, could Jennifer have gone to him?"

"It's possible."

"Are you *really* going to call in the police?"

"Nothing else for it, if I don't hear something by the end of the afternoon. I'm only waitin' as long as that to please the grandparents. They don't seem over-anxious to have the police brought in. Told them I couldn't continue to accept responsibility, and was stretchin' a point every hour I let it go on. Don't know what they're afraid of, I'm sure. Gals *will* do these naughty things. Ain't anybody else's fault."

"I still think it would be a good idea for me to go to Castell Foel and make a few enquiries on the spot."

"Well, you won't. And stop tryin' to mind my business for me! Here's your Timothy. He'll uphold my authority."

"I'm sure it doesn't need any help from me," said Timothy, coming into the room. "What's Alison being obstreperous about?"

"She ain't. Don't have obstreperous gals in my school, not if they know what's good for them. She wants to drive over to Castell Foel to talk about the Purlieu child with the grandparents."

"Too far to drive in one go," said Timothy. "Apart from that, where would she stay the night? Anyway, Alison, I'd go myself if I thought it would do the slightest bit of good. They'll phone the school if Jennifer turns up—or if she doesn't as the case may be. And if you still think you're going to oil out of helping me judge these dramatics this afternoon, you can think again, so don't act ornery."

"I suppose," said Alison, on a sudden thought, "Jennifer Purlieu hadn't a part in one of these plays? If so, isn't it just possible that she's had a bad attack of stage-fright and has decided to opt out, as the saying is?"

"Never thought of that! It's possible, I suppose. I'd better find out," said Miss Pomfret-Brown.

"Have they an understudy? Which House is it?"

"It's the *Campbell of Kilmhor* crowd. Tell you what! You used to be interested in all this. Why don't you have a word with Fiona MacLeod? She's the housemistress and responsible for the production. I'll send for her, and we'll see what she thinks of your suggestion. She should know the gal better than I do."

Miss MacLeod turned out to be a tall, dark woman of about Alison's own age. She was quietly spoken, deferential (in a dignified way) to Miss Pomfret-Brown, and she repudiated the suggestion that Jennifer Purlieu was suffering from stage-fright.

"She was in the play last year," she reminded the headmistress, "and did quite well. She has the finest part this year in *Campbell*—she's Mary Stewart. We'll not be able to put the play on without her, because, if we haven't a Mary Stewart, well, we haven't a Mary Stewart. Apart from Campbell himself, which I am playing for lack of anyone better, Mary is the key figure, more so even than Dugald, her son, and I have not one other girl capable of playing the part. Jennifer, keen though she is, was not really adequate, but the understudy is hopeless."

"Well, Jennifer or no Jennifer, you are not to drop out. It's defeatist, and I won't have such an attitude in my school," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "You and your understudy must just take the mornin' orf and get the thing right, that's all."

"I suppose," said Alison diffidently, as she noted the obstinate set of Miss MacLeod's battleship chin, "you wouldn't allow *me* to have a go? I know the play backwards, and I've always wanted a part in it."

"And if you take one," said Timothy, his amused voice helping to pour oil on the troubled waters, "I suppose it means you'll be able to duck out of helping me judge the competition? Thank you very much!"

"Well," said Miss MacLeod, slightly softening her mulish expression, "it's very good of you, Mrs. Herring."

"Of course it is," said Miss Pomfret-Brown, "so no more of this Highland naughtiness. Away with the two of you. Take your players out of class, Fiona, and have a good run-through. And take that glint out of your eye. It's insubordinate."

Miss MacLeod swung round on her, but was restrained by feeling Alison's hand on her arm.

"It won't exactly be a competition, though, will it, with both of them in the production?" asked Timothy, thinking it might be as well to create a diversion again.

"Oh, yes, it will. Staff and parents often take part," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "Be off, you two, and don't waste any more time."

"Well," said Timothy, "I seem to have lost a wife and gained Melpomene. Is Alison really good?"

"You'll be surprised," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "Well, I'll see this Thespian banquet through and then, if I haven't heard from the Purlieus, I shall call in the police."

"This rumour about kidnapping . . ."

"Might be something in it, as there's a fortune at stake, but my private opinion is that the naughty gal's run off. Can't get anything out of her friends, you see. They'd talk fast enough if she'd been kidnapped."

"I wonder whether I might talk to them? Sometimes a stranger . . ."

"Especially a devil of a fellow like you. Yes, it might work with gals of their age. Gals of any age, come to that."

"You flatter me."

"No, I don't. Talked Alison into marryin' you, didn't yer? I'll send for 'em and leave you to do your damndest. Only hope you can get something more out of the little sillies than I did. Very upsettin' and frustratin', this code of honour business. You expect it in boys, but girls ought to have more sense. A little tittle-tattle would come in uncommon useful in the present circumstances. But no! They're as

uncommunicative as little goldfish, not as decorative and just about as useless.”

“You wouldn’t want tale-bearers.”

“No, of course not, but when it may be a question of a wretched child’s safety—! They can’t see the difference, that’s the trouble.”

“In essence, there isn’t any difference, you know, if Jennifer Purlieu swore them to secrecy.”

“Where winkles are concerned, how do you rate with a pin?”

“It’s not for me to boast. Bring on your suspects and let me get busy on their tiny minds.”

“You take care they don’t vamp you,” said Miss Pomfret-Brown, ringing the bell. “Serpents in Eden, every one of ’em.”

The serpents in Eden turned out to be three fifteen-year-olds, who, at first glance, appeared to be more like doves than serpents. They were dressed in school uniform which, as it was no longer compulsory at the school, had become, with the contrariness to be expected in the female young, the only fashionable wear. One was a tall blonde who carried her slim height in soldierly fashion and was destined, as he found out later, to take the part of Captain Sandeman in the House play. Another was a lively redhead whom he recognized instantly.

“Miss Sandra Davidson, I believe?” he said.

“Yes. Hullo, Mr. Herring. This is Anthea and this is Jane. Did you give Marchmont permission to act in our play? Anthea’s in it, too, but somebody is reading her part in the rehearsal, just to give Marchmont a run-through, so not to worry. Have you come to pump us about Jennifer Purlieu? Honestly, we don’t know a thing. We told Miss Pomfret-Brown so, but obviously she didn’t believe us.”

“Are you in Jennifer’s dormitory?”

“The Lower Fifth don’t have dormitories. We’re taking our O-levels in June, so we have study-bedrooms. Jennifer

sleeps on our floor, that's all, but she's older than us."

"Do, please, sit down."

"Oh, yes, *you* can't until *we* do." They seated themselves on Miss Pomfret-Brown's beautiful chairs. "Last time I was in here," went on Sandra, with a reminiscent chuckle, "I was up on a charge, but I'm quite a reformed character since I got into Upper School. Tell us all about Jennifer Purlieu. There's no end of a hoo-ha going on, and we've made a book on how soon the police will be called in—hours and minutes to count, not days, because they're bound to come into it sometime today, aren't they, provided there isn't any news of her?"

"I'm afraid so, yes. Pretty rotten for the school. That kind of publicity does nobody any good. Once the police are called in, it's very difficult to keep the thing out of the papers."

"It's no use your saying that," said the tall, blonde Anthea. "We *would* tell, if we knew anything, but we don't." She sounded so defiant that Timothy was interested.

"You may be like those witnesses in detective stories," he said, "who know something without being aware of the fact. For instance, did you ever, when you were juniors, hear a rumour that Jennifer might be kidnapped?"

"Oh, yes, she told us so herself. I'm afraid we only hooted," said the third girl, a dark-haired, grey-eyed siren with long and beautiful legs. "I remembered it when we heard she was missing."

"Did her relatives come to visit her at school?"

"Well, there were two awfully weird aunts or something. That was in our first year," said Sandra. "One of them began joining in when the choir was singing. It sounded perfectly awful, and the other relations, a rather grim character who looked like Lady Bracknell and a much older person, a man, took her outside. We've never seen any of them again."

"What made you connect them with Jennifer Purlieu?"

"Oh, because Annabel Leigh, her cousin, was a House prefect at the time, and she sent for me and said, 'If you or any of the other little beasts make anything of Jennifer's frightful aunt, well, she happens to be my aunt, too, so watch out, that's all. One snide remark from any of you, and I'll make your silly little lives unbearable. People aren't responsible for their relatives, and I daresay your own aren't anything to boast about, if the truth were known.' She was in an awful mood. The stupid part was that, until she spoke, we hadn't a clue the frightful woman *was* Jennifer's aunt."

"Could she have carried out her threat—Annabel, I mean?"

"*Ra-ther!* She could have stuck us in Prefects' D. any number of times, if she liked to book us for all the little things the prefects usually wink at or just tell you off about, and she played centre-half in the first eleven and could have seen to it that we played against her in House practices. On the hockey field she was just simply the Assyrian coming down like a wolf on the fold. We were sick-terrified of her."

"I see. Tough tactics, but they worked."

"You *bet* they worked," said Sandra feelingly. "Besides, she was quite right. One can't help one's relations. I remember my own darling mum, in a debate the parents had against the school debating society, telling the most *frightful* anecdotes about my cute sayings when I was a young child. I writhe even now when I think of it."

"Did any of you ever go to stay with Jennifer during the holidays?"

They shook their heads.

"She told us she lived in a castle," said the grey-eyed Jane.

"No, she didn't," contradicted Sandra. "If you remember, she said she was *going* to live in one. She said it was in Wales, and that it was the family seat because she was really of noble birth. Of course, we hooted her down."

"When was this?" asked Timothy. Sandra wrinkled her brow.

"I think it would have been when we were in the First Form," she said. "Ages ago, anyway. She never said anything more about it, and her parents got divorced, or died, or something, so, of course, nobody asked any questions, because lots of parents seemed to get divorced round about that time, so it wasn't done to refer to it, because you never knew, you see, whether your own family might not be the next one. I think parents get awfully irresponsible when they know their children are safely away at boarding-school."

"I never thought of that," said Timothy. "I suppose some of them do cut loose when the critic on the hearth is absent."

"You'd be surprised," said the soldierly Anthea, "to what an extent some of them need to have an eye kept on them."

"When Jennifer told you she might be kidnapped, did she mention money?"

"Oh, no," said Jane. "She didn't say she'd be kidnapped for a *ransom*, only that her relatives were having some sort of fight and all of them wanted to get hold of her. Her parents were separated then, but not divorced, I believe. She made it sound frightfully romantic, and all that, but we thought a castle was pretty small beer, actually, because they're almost always in ruins, and they're damp and have rats and spiders. She didn't even claim the castle had a ghost, so, of course, we thought nothing of it at all."

"They don't know anything," said Timothy to Miss Pomfret-Brown, when the three girls had returned to their House and the headmistress had joined him in her pleasant sitting-room.

"Sure of that? They're younger than she is, of course."

“Positive. They don’t even seem to be all that friendly with her. They say her study-bedroom is on their floor, but they don’t seem particularly interested in her.”

“Strange! Miss MacLeod seemed to think . . . I’ll have another word with her, perhaps, when the drama festival is over. Come along and have lunch, and we’ll assess the degree of stage-fright Alison is copin’ with.”

If Alison was coping with stage fright, she gave no sign of it. So little did she appear to be perturbed by the ordeal of appearing in a play in which she had been rehearsed for less than half the morning that Miss Pomfret-Brown remarked, over the coffee which followed lunch,

“You’re filled with sinful exaltation, you bad gal, ain’t you? Lay you five to one you fluff yer lines this afternoon.”

Alison, with a light in her eyes which Timothy respectfully recognized as a battle-cry, laughed and retorted,

“Only five to one? ‘Master Flurry, you must make it eight, sir.’”

Timothy, after a brief congratulatory speech to the players, retired to Miss Pomfret-Brown’s sitting-room, having cravenly placed all four Houses equal first in the drama competition. He was waiting, with his hostess, for Alison to remove her make-up and change her costume, when there came a gentle tap on the door.

“Oh, Lord! What’s happened now? They know this part of the house is out of bounds,” said Miss Pomfret-Brown. “I suppose it ain’t news of the Purlieu child?” She went to the door and opened it. The tall, slim Anthea stood there. She was still wearing Captain Sandeman’s red coat with the blue and white facings, although she had laid aside his sword and his hat. She was flushed and looked extremely handsome. She had also obviously been in tears.

“Well, what is it?” asked the headmistress. “You know you gals ain’t supposed to badger me in private.”

"I'm sorry, Miss Pomfret-Brown. Could I speak to Mr. Herring?" Timothy's thoughts flew to Alison, but the girl gave him no time to ask what would have proved to be an unnecessary question. Before he could frame it, she went on: "I'd sworn not to tell, but after Miss Marchmont's—I mean Mrs. Herring's—last speech in our play, I feel I simply must. It was when she finished the bit at the very end that I felt I couldn't keep quiet any longer."

"Well, out with it," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "What's it all about? We haven't got time to waste."

The girl addressed herself to Timothy.

"Mr. Herring, I don't know where Jennifer's gone, but half-way through morning school yesterday she received a letter."

"But I asked Miss MacLeod about letters," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "She hands out the post to you gals, don't she?"

"Yes, but I don't think the letter came by post."

"Boy-friend?"

"Oh, *no*, Miss Pomfret-Brown. I'm *sure* it wasn't. Jennifer found it in her locker in the gym vestibule."

"Did she show it you?"

"No, but I was there when she found it. She was terribly upset and just told me she'd got to go home and was worried about it because she was in the play. She made me swear not to tell about the letter, and I promised, but when Miss Marchmont—I mean Mrs. Herring—made that last speech about not leaving the boy to lie out there alone, well, it got me down, and I wondered—I thought—I mean, well, it came to me that something terrible could have happened to Jennifer, because she had been in an awful flap about the letter, and when you questioned us and I realized she *hadn't* gone home, and that she'd been all upset—I wish I'd told you before, but, well . . ."

"You ain't to blame, child. We all make stupid promises at times and think we ought to stick to them. Glad you've

come to your senses. Get along now. You did very nicely in the play."

"Well," exclaimed Timothy, when the girl had left them. "Wonders will never cease! I would have taken ten to one that you'd tear her limb from limb."

"No sense in that. Can't expect 'em to betray their friends. Remind me I owe Alison eight shillings or eight pounds, or eight something or other. She *didn't* fluff her lines. Very far from it. She's helped a lot. Now to get on to those Purlieu people. They might have had the decency to let me know she'd arrived there."

"I don't think she has, you know," said Timothy. "I'm sure they'd have phoned or wired. See here now! Suppose I get along to the Purlieus at once? You could look after Alison for the night—let her stay here—couldn't you? We ought to settle the matter. If she told this other kid that she was going to Castell Foel, and has gone somewhere quite other, there's something very fishy going on. Is she the type to run off with a boy?—anything of that nature?"

"The other gals said not, and they always know—or think they do. But where that sort of thing is concerned there's never any tellin' *what* the naughty little lunatics will get up to. Much obliged if you *would* go and find out what you can. That is, if I don't get any information from my next phone call."

Confronted by a *fait accompli* in that, by the time she presented herself in Miss Pomfret-Brown's quarters, Timothy had finished his tea, Alison, learning that the telephone call to the Purlieu had been abortive and that Timothy had gone off in the car, accepted the situation and an offer of a bed for the night.

"Good thing you were here to take that part and make Mary Stewart's closin' speech," said the headmistress, "or we might not have got that little ass Anthea Potter to speak out. You seem to have knocked her endwise."

"That was the play, not me."

"Your Timothy seems to think the Purlieus are all right and would have let us know if the gal had gone to them."

"I imagine he's right. All the same, he might just as well have had me with him, if only to do the navigating. I'll have something to say to him when next we meet!"

"It won't get you anywhere," said Miss Pomfret-Brown.

It was dark by the time Timothy reached Gloucester. He decided to get some dinner, since, even if he pressed on without eating, it was unlikely that he would arrive at Castell Foel before the Purlieus retired to bed. When he resumed his journey it was with the feeling that his efforts were probably a waste of effort, time, and petrol, but he was fond of the abrupt, unconventional Miss Pomfret-Brown and appreciated her proprietary affection for his wife. Therefore he was glad that his self-appointed task of getting to Castell Foel was doing something to lessen her anxieties concerning her truant, abortive though his pilgrimage might prove.

He was not at all sure that after Betws-y-Coed he would remember the route, especially in the dark, but luck was with him. When he reached the lakeside, he pulled up, leaving his headlamps on. He thought that perhaps someone in the house might still be awake and, noticing the brilliant lights, switch on a light somewhere in the house and come to a window to investigate.

In this he was not disappointed. As he watched, a light sprang up in a bedroom window which faced his way. In another minute or so the hall light also was switched on. Timothy left the car and walked towards the house. He tapped on the front door.

"Who's that?" asked a man's voice.

"Herring. Is Jennifer with you?"

"No." The door was partly opened. "You'd better come in. Please don't make a noise. I don't want to disturb my wife or the servants. Come in here."

"I'm sorry to bother you," said Timothy, "especially at this time of night—morning, actually, I suppose." He followed Purlieu into what was evidently the dining-room. "The fact is that, from something we heard at the school this afternoon, it seems that Jennifer had expressed the intention of coming here, and as Miss Pomfret-Brown is extremely worried about her I offered to come over and find out whether she's turned up."

"The only people who've been here since your party left us are your demolition gang. I must say I thought it was a bit high-handed of you to have sent them before we had finalized the arrangements, but, of course, I felt bound to let them carry on."

"*What!*" said Timothy. "I've sent nobody. What do you mean—my demolition gang?"

"Two workmen came yesterday and began to demolish the bricked-up entrance. But what is all this about Jennifer? We are at a loss. Miss Pomfret-Brown has been several times on the telephone to us, but we can tell her nothing. She should have taken better care of the child. I hold her entirely responsible."

"Even from prisons of maximum security people have been known to escape, and a boarding-school for girls is not a prison," said Timothy, "is it?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Castle Sinister

"He struck the door hard wi' his foot
And pushed it wi" his knee;
And iron locks and iron bars
Into the floor flung he.
'Be not afraid, Burd Ellen,' he says,
'There's none comes in but me.'"

Border Ballad—*Childe Waters*

"Well, look now," said Purlieu, "there's no point in trying to sort anything out until daylight, so if you can manage on the drawing-room settee I'll bring you some blankets and a drink."

"Thanks very much," said Timothy. "I'll just go and switch off my lights, then."

"Oh, yes, your car. I'd ask you to drive it up here to the house, except that . . ."

"Except that it might wake your wife. Well, I'm awake, and of course Mr. Herring must bring his car up to the house," said Mrs. Purlieu, appearing in the doorway. "What's going on, anyway? Has Mr. Herring any news about Jennifer?"

"I'm afraid not, in the sense you mean," said Timothy. "All I know is that one of her friends at school thinks she

intended to come here, but it's obvious that she hasn't arrived."

"But why should she want to come here in term-time? She isn't in any trouble at school, is she?"

"I asked that. No, I am told she is in no trouble at all. It's all the more extraordinary in that she had quite an important part in a one-act play. I suppose she couldn't have had a bad attack of stage-fright, could she, and decided to cut her stick rather than face an audience?"

"I shouldn't think so. She was in the big play last Christmas and she has won medals for elocution," said Mrs. Purlieu. "I can't understand this running away at all. It's most unlike her."

"I heard a rumour at the school," said Timothy, choosing his words, "to the effect that she might have gone to be with her mother."

"You mean all that kidnapping nonsense. But that was years ago, and was settled quite amicably. Her mother was divorced, you know, and the last thing she said she wanted was to be saddled with a girl of Jennifer's age. Well, we had better all get some sleep. There is nothing we can do tonight. Tomorrow I suppose the police will have to come into it, unless we or the school get a letter."

"A minor mystery has cropped up, my dear," said Purlieu. "Mr. Herring gave no orders for the tower to be breached."

"I should hardly do that without letting you know," said Timothy. "Did the workmen have anything in writing to show you?"

"No. The first we knew of it was when the foreman knocked on the door and said he had orders to open up the front of the tower and was it all right to begin," said Mrs. Purlieu, after glancing at her husband to find out whether she should be the one to answer. "We were rather surprised, but, as we had given you permission, we told him to go ahead."

“He didn’t mention my name?”

“No, he did not mention anybody’s name. He suggested that we might like to keep the windows shut on that side of the house, as there might be dust, and he promised there would be no noise, and that is all,” said Purlieu. “We must give Mr. Herring a shake down for the rest of the night, my dear.”

Timothy found it difficult to get to sleep. For one thing, the settee was not long enough to accommodate his six feet two, and, for another, he was turning over in his mind the curious coincidence of the missing schoolgirl and the unauthorized demolition of part of Castell Foel. He wondered whether the Purlieus were as ingenuous as they seemed, and whether the family at Netherton Fivefields had been the *dei ex machina* in both affairs. He did sleep at last, but only on a hair-trigger, and the first light was beginning to show behind the curtains when he woke, rolled off the settee, and put on his shoes and his jacket.

The workmen had not got far with their removal of the bricks which formed the unsightly barrier to the ground-floor entrance to the castle. They had made a hole, roughly in the shape of a six-foot square, through which it was possible to climb, although they had left a kind of doorstep of bricks about a foot up from the ground. Timothy peered in through the aperture and then stepped over this low barrier and entered the keep.

The light was dim, but, owing to the fact that the tower was open to the sky, he could see well enough to make his way over the uneven floor to the staircase in the thickened angle of the wall. He was tempted to climb up and he even essayed the first eight or nine steps, but they were slippery and treacherous and the dawn-light which sufficed on the open floor of the tower was quite insufficient here to prove whether an ascent of the staircase was either practicable or safe.

Unable, because of the width of his shoulders, to turn round, he eased himself cautiously backwards down to ground level and bumped into someone who was standing there.

"My apologies," said his host. "I heard you leave the house, and followed you to warn you that the newel stair is tricky."

"Yes, in this dim light, it is," said Timothy. "I came out here because I'm still extremely puzzled about those workmen who came. You can't suggest any explanation, I suppose? I simply can't imagine who sent them."

"Your architect friend, perhaps."

"Oh, I hardly think so. He wouldn't have done so without consulting me. Oh, well, the problem will solve itself when the workmen come again this morning to finish the job. Perhaps you will enquire of their foreman who sent them here."

"Do you require them to finish the job?"

"I suppose they may as well. And get them to tidy it up. Well, I had better be off. I must report back to Miss Pomfret-Brown. Thank you very much for putting me up."

"Oh, my dear Herring, you must have some breakfast."

"Thank you, no. It's a meal I entirely disregard," said Timothy, entirely untruthfully. He returned with Purlieu to the house, tipped the elderly couple who appeared to be the only servants, and collected his overcoat and driving gloves. Mrs. Purlieu was not up, so he left his thanks and regards, promised his host that he would keep in touch with him, and drove off in the direction of Betws-y-Coed. There he telephoned Miss Pomfret-Brown to report that there was no news of Jennifer Purlieu at her grandparents' home, left a message for Alison, breakfasted at the only hotel which opened before Easter, and suddenly made up his mind to drive off again in the direction of Castell Foel as soon as breakfast was over.

Several years' experience in dealing with unscrupulous persons who wanted to sell Phisbe a pup had given him a suspicious and cynical outlook where his job was concerned. He did not believe for an instant that the Purlieus had known nothing about the workmen who had been sent to breach the castle wall. It was to the highest degree unlikely, in his opinion, that they should have assented so unsuspiciously to the work of demolition before they had written proof that the Society had the firm intention of renting the castle. Purlieu almost certainly had been lying, but for what purpose Timothy had no idea.

Apart from this, it seemed that he was as much an object of suspicion to the Purlieus as they were to him. He had gone up to the keep in that first light of morning with the utmost quietness and circumspection, his object being not to disturb the household, yet Purlieu must have been awake and heard or seen him go out. Then, Timothy had slept on the settee fully dressed except for jacket and shoes and had only needed to put these on—the work of a few seconds—yet Purlieu had turned up in the keep only a few minutes later, and was fully dressed. Timothy had wasted no time in reaching and entering the keep, and had spent no more than a couple of minutes in deciding that to climb more than a few steps up the dark newel stair was impracticable in the dim, early-morning light. Therefore, that Purlieu should have been already standing at the foot of the stair when Timothy unwittingly bumped into him meant that the man must have followed him as soon as he left the house. He must also have crept into the keep without making a sound, no doubt to find out what Timothy was up to in the tower.

It was also made clear that Purlieu knew the stair was tricky. It began to look as though there might have been some reason why casual visitors should not be allowed to enter the tower alone. Having come to this conclusion, nothing, Timothy knew, would satisfy him but to return there

and find out, if he could, what was going on. He had a desperate and uneasy feeling that this might have some connection with the unexplained departure of Jennifer Purlieu from the school. He reflected that, although her disappearance was, in a sense, none of his business, he had committed himself to helping to find her, and Castell Foel, at the moment, seemed the focal point from which to approach the problem of tracking her down.

Before he committed himself further, however, he took the precaution of making a telephone call to Glanvilliers Ryanston, but without much hope that that tycoon would be available personally to answer the call at such an early hour.

This, he found, was not the case. Ryanston was already at his office and apparently had given orders that any calls from Timothy were to be put through to him at once.

"Sent a demolition squad to this tower of yours?" said Ryanston. "No, of course I haven't. I thought I told you I'd changed my mind about a castle. Surely I did, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. I just wondered whether, by any chance, you'd changed your mind back again."

"Oh, no, I never do—not about locations. I want next to complete the negotiations with those people at Netherton Fivefields. Their stuff will suit me all right, but they're hedging, although I think we shall be able to come to terms. Meet me for lunch in Shaftesbury tomorrow at half-past one?"

"Fine," said Timothy, and rang off. What excuse he could make for calling upon the Purlieus again no longer troubled him. He could tell them that he had rung the film company and that they had confirmed that they did not want to rent the castle; neither had they sent workmen to effect an entrance into the keep. "And after that," said Timothy to himself, "we'll play it by ear."

He turned the car in the direction of Castell Foel and did not realize, until he came to a bridge across a river, that his bump of location was not as infallible as he had thought, or

else he had been so immersed in his speculations that he had mistaken the turning. On the further side of the bridge he pulled up and consulted the map. It informed him that he had anticipated the turning to the lakeside keep, not overrun it. It was impossible to turn the car in the narrow lane which the bridge carried across the turbulent, small river, so he drove on, hoping to find a turning-place further on.

He went slowly, keeping a look-out for this, and, with dramatic suddenness, came upon a view of the castle itself. What was more, a track of sorts appeared to lead to it. Timothy turned into this and drove along it as far as its width would allow. There were no indications that any vehicle other than his own had ever used it, so, regarding this as a sign that he would not be causing an obstruction, he left the car, locked it, and began to climb the hill. It was still clear that the path was seldom or never used. It was steep, muddy, and, in places, so overgrown with bracken that he had to plough his way through the harsh, wet fronds with nothing but the sight of the keep to guide him.

Coming out upon the small plateau on which the keep had been built, all he was first aware of was the beauty of the view, and he stood for some minutes enjoying the prospect of the serene reaches of the misty lake, the delicate first green of the trees, and the contrasting scowling darkness of the mountains.

Turning his eyes to his more immediate surroundings, he became aware that from his vantage point he could look down on the path which led from the lakeside to the Purlieus' house, although of the house itself, owing to a screen of trees, nothing but part of the roof with its chimneys was visible.

On the path activity was going on. Two foreshortened figures were carrying a heavy box towards a Land-Rover which was parked in the drive. The box, from where Timothy stood, bore sufficient resemblance to a coffin for him to

conceal himself at an angle of the keep to watch what was happening. The figures could have been those of a man and a woman, from which he deduced that they were either his host and hostess of the previous night or the married couple whom they employed as servants, or they could have been two men, since both appeared to be wearing trousers.

With some difficulty, it appeared, the coffin-like box was manhandled into the Land-Rover, then the two persons climbed into the front seats and the vehicle drove slowly off towards the lake and the road. Timothy remained where he was for a minute or two, then, when he had lost sight of the Land-Rover, two thoughts occurred to him. One was that whether the people in the car were masters or servants made no difference to his delivery of his message. The second was that he did not intend to waste this opportunity of making a daylight inspection of the keep, free from the presence of other people. There was a secretive streak in his nature which made him find his own company extremely congenial at times, and this was one of them. He stepped over the brickwork doorsill which had been left standing, and ducked in at the rough, six-foot hole.

There was only one aperture to light the newel stair, a rectangular, narrow opening about a third of the way up. He climbed up to it, peered out, and found that, from it, he could see a stretch of the road. As he watched, the Land-Rover passed out of his field of vision, but appeared to be going towards Corwen. He realized that he might be able to see more from the open top of the tower if it should prove feasible to climb so high, but he found, as he had half-expected, that the staircase ended short of what had been the battlements, and when at last he found himself in the open air his view was obstructed and did not include any stretch of the road up which the Land-Rover might be passing.

His theory, from his previous inspection, that the keep had been built in four storeys, was borne out by his

discovery that, at two places on his way up, he passed small embrasured openings which indicated the existence, in times past, of entrances into rooms. They looked straight down into the well of the keep and had not been railed off.

As he descended, it seemed to Timothy that the whole building had an eerie quality about it, owing largely, he thought, to the absolute silence which, except for his own stumbling footfalls on the worn stone stair, embraced and surrounded the castle. As he passed the lower of the floor-openings on his cautious descent, a bird, with the screech of doom, flew across the interior of the keep, and Timothy, almost losing his balance, thought suddenly of a death-fall. It would be so easy, on that winding, narrow stair, to become a little confused, perhaps, with the continual turning of the spiral; then an attack of giddiness, a slight lurch towards an opening into the keep (an opening which had once been a doorway into a hall or solar), and down one might tumble—well, not a tall, broad-shouldered man who had never suffered from giddiness at any time in his life, so far as he could remember—but a child, perhaps, advancing to the edge of the small stone threshold and stumblingly taking one short step too many . . . or—a macabre idea, but it came to him unbidden—receiving a sudden push . . . He groped his way downwards, one hand on the newel pillar round which all the steps revolved, and was not sorry to get to the bottom.

From the ground floor of the keep he looked up at the openings before he stepped over the doorsill of bricks and out into the air. He glanced at his watch. The time was half-past ten, but there was no sign of the workmen who, surely, should have returned to continue the work of removing the remainder of the bricks from the ground-floor entrance. Whoever had sent for them on the previous day would surely not have countermanded the order while the job was only half completed. He shook his head and took the

downhill path which he and his party had followed on their previous visit.

As he descended its slippery little windings he tried—not for the first time—to work out the identity of the person or persons who had given orders for the bricks to be removed. He himself, Alison, and Ryanston could be dismissed without question. Young Coningsby would never have taken it upon himself to give such an order on his own responsibility, and it was not the concern of the other members of committee who had formed the *quorum* to take any other action than to vote on what should be done. As for the inhabitants of Netherton Fivefields, it was doubtful whether they even knew that the lower entrance to the keep had been bricked up, and it was not their concern, in any case, to have it reopened, since they could gain nothing, financially, from Phisbe's restoration of the castle. As to Purlieu's suggestion that Tom Parsons had ordered the work to be done, Timothy had rightly dismissed that as unworthy of a moment's consideration.

That brought his thoughts back to a point from which they had never very far strayed. The only people who could have ordered the bricks to be removed were the Purlieus themselves, the owners of the site. The difficulty was to make out what their object could have been. There had been no need whatsoever for them to go to the trouble and expense of making an entrance, since Phisbe would have undertaken both. Yet there must have been a reason, and there must have been a reason for Purlieu's denials. This brought Timothy back to another thought which had nagged him. Why should the entrance have been bricked up in the first place? The keep was not dangerous; its masonry was sound enough. If it had been used by the previous owners as a storehouse, a ground-floor doorway would have been a necessity, so, even if the keep had become a depository for junk and general rubbish, what could have been the object in bricking it up?

Besides, in that case, what had happened to the junk? Certainly it was nearly a fortnight since he and his party had first seen Castell Foel, but it was only a few days since the committee had made its decision to rent the site from the Purlieus, a decision which, so far, had not been communicated to them, for, following shortly on the committee meeting, there had been the more immediate problem of Jennifer Purlieu's disappearance from school, and all telephone communications with the Purlieus had been connected with that, and not with the renting of the castle.

Of course, the Purlieus might have taken it for granted that Phisbe intended to restore the keep. In that case, they might have argued that it would save the Society's time, and, by so doing, help to reinforce its decision, if immediate entry into the keep was made possible. All the same, it seemed an unnecessary procedure, particularly on the part of people who were more anxious to make money than to spend it, and then, again, why lie about it? It did not make sense.

Still (he reflected philosophically) if the tower had been cluttered up with junk, and the junk had been removed in a hopeful spirit by the Purlieus, all the better. He decided to make some reference to it when he saw them again, as he fully intended to do, and he had reached this decision when he remembered (and disconcertingly connected) the coffin-like box which had been loaded on to the Land-Rover and the disappearance of the seventeen-year-old Jennifer.

His imagination having made the connection, his reason refused to entertain it. The Purlieus had probably been loading up produce of some kind to take to market, or some china or furniture which they wanted to sell at second-hand. Dismissing any morbid ideas that something other than junk had been removed from the interior of the keep, he came out upon the path which skirted the house, and, plunging down it towards the shore of the lake, he soon turned in at the gates to the ugly building. These had been left wide

open and the marks of the Land-Rover's tyres could be seen in the wet gravel. Sparing little thought for them, Timothy strode up the drive to the front door and rang the bell.

There was no answer. He waited and then rang again, but still got no reply. This was frustrating. He had seen two people leave in the Land-Rover, and had taken it for granted that the other two would still be in the house. If the two with the Land-Rover had been Purlieu and his wife, then the servants would have remained at home. If the servants had been the ones to drive off, that should have left the Purlieus to answer the door and deal with callers.

Like all frustrated people, Timothy was unwilling to accept that fate was against him. It was possible, he argued, that the two left behind had gone into the garden. The early spring morning had a nip in the air, but the weather was fine. There might be laundry to peg out, greenhouses to be inspected, a dog to be exercised, a pony to groom. He passed the front windows and made his way round to the side of the house.

Except for one window about half-way up, this presented a blank wall, but leaning against it were a couple of pickaxes. The pickaxes were new. Timothy began to think that no workmen had been employed, but that Purlieu and his man had tackled the demolition for themselves. All the same, if this were so, why should Purlieu not have said so? However, perhaps the box which had been taken away on the Land-Rover was nothing other than a repository for any whole and useful bricks which might have been saved, and which would serve some small purpose on another part of the estate—to reinforce a culvert, perhaps, or shore up a crumbling wall.

He passed on, glancing about him. At this side there was no garden. There was nothing but bracken and bramble, coarse grass, dead heather, stunted willows, and here and there, in the damp woods further over, clumps of

wild daffodils, golden against the sad-coloured trunks of the trees.

One other thing Timothy noticed, although, at the moment, it seemed of little consequence. Some person or persons had trodden very recently through the bracken. The fronds, most of them brown and dead, but with the young, green, tender fern already unfolding, were crushed, broken, and trampled. At the end of this destructive little walk a whole heap of dead bracken had been piled, cut, no doubt, from some other part of the hill. Timothy, noting this automatically, went round to the back of the house. Here a cleared space had been turned into a kitchen garden across which a line to hold washing was stretched between an apple tree and a pulley attached to the side of the kitchen window. Further off, behind the apple tree, were currant bushes and enough apple, pear, and plum to constitute a small orchard.

He surveyed this and then went up to the kitchen door and hammered on it. There was not only no reply, but he received, as it were from the house itself, that peculiar, heart-sinking conviction that it was entirely empty. He peered in at the window, and caught his breath. Then he looked again, and laughed at his own fears.

CHAPTER NINE

The Empty Nest

“At last we came to our inn weary and peevish, and began to inquire for meat and beds. Of the provisions the negative catalogue was very copious.”

“Dr. Samuel Johnson—*Journey to the Western Islands*

“A skeleton?” said Alison. “But what on earth did you do?”

“Nothing.”

“But, surely—I mean, ought not the police to be told?”

“Why? I admit that when I first looked in I got a nasty jolt, but, after all, if the Purlieus like to keep anatomical specimens spread out on the kitchen floor, who am I to interfere with their pleasures? I took a grip on my emotions and recollected that we had a beautifully articulated skeleton in the biology lab at school, and I expect they’re two a penny in the big teaching hospitals, so what’s so special about a wired-up collection of ancient bones?”

“Because they may not be wired up and they may not be all that ancient.”

“You’re being fanciful, aren’t you? I was, too, at first, but you’re being irrational now.”

“Am I? Look at the sequence of events.”

“You’ve got Aunt Waltruda on the brain!”

“I wasn’t thinking of Aunt Waltruda.”

"All right, spell it out. I'm listening."

"You may be listening, but you're not attempting to take me seriously."

"Lady, by yonder blessed moon I swear . . ."

"Thanks to the American astronauts, that comes under the heading of 'old swearing' nowadays. Nobody will ever think the moon romantic any more. Helen's eye isn't the only thing dust has closed, you know."

"According to recent research, the moon isn't all that dusty. Besides, I wasn't being romantic. I was being profound. In other words, I *always* take you seriously, so 'take my hand quick and tell me what have you in your heart.'"

"I don't like that mysterious, uncalled-for opening-up of the keep. It had been agreed and arranged that Phisbe would do it, and they—the Purlieus—were glad to be saved the expense, or so they said. What call had they, then, to interfere and begin doing the work themselves? It doesn't make sense, unless there was something inside the tower which had to be removed before anyone saw it there."

"Well, if they were putting on an act, they did it jolly well. They seemed no end surprised when I told them that, whoever had opened up the keep, it was not Phisbe's workmen."

"The workmen were Purlieu and his man, and they opened the tower to take the skeleton out, of course."

"And then spread the poor cadaver on the kitchen floor for me—or any visiting tradesman—to see? Come off it, Alison, darling!"

"I agree there's a weak point in my argument, but the Purlieus certainly couldn't have expected you to come back, and they'll be bound to know the days their tradesmen call, so I still think my suspicions might be justified."

"I can't see how. What was to stop them burying the skeleton in the garden, if they didn't want anyone to see it?"

"I don't know, but I still think you ought to tell the police what you saw."

"They wouldn't thank me."

"What about the coffin you saw being taken away?"

"First, I have no evidence that it *was* a coffin."

"The Purlieu child is still missing."

"Oh, now, really!"

"And you saw two people, not four, going off in that station wagon."

"Well?"

"Where are the servants? You said there was nobody at home when you called."

"Why should there have been? They'd gone out shopping, most likely. Besides, I can't be sure whether it was two men, or two women, or a man and a woman that I saw. I was too far off to make out, especially now so many women dress pretty much the same as men."

"All the same, you had the impression that they were a man and a woman. The police are rather cross with P.-B., by the way. They say she ought to have told them sooner that one of the girls was missing."

"Fair enough. I think so, too."

"Yet you won't report this skeleton and that coffin-box!"

"And be treated as though I'm soft in the head?"

"Well," said Alison, reasonably enough, "surely that's better than letting the Purlieus get away with murder?"

"Oh, look, now, hang it all. . . !"

"Will you go to the police, or shall I?"

"That's an ultimatum, is it?"

"Oh, Tim, I'm sorry, but I'm sure it's the only thing to do."

"Look here, will you compromise? I mean, I really don't want to stick my neck out and look a fool."

"Tell me what you intend to do. I'll consider anything that's reasonable."

"Well, I've promised to meet Ryanston tomorrow, but, after that, let me go back to the Purlieus and ask a few leading questions before I commit myself to reporting this skeleton."

"But if I'm right—and I know I am—I don't think you would be safe."

"Fiddlesticks! The man is twice my age!"

"There's his manservant."

"Oh, really, Alison!"

"Will you take Tom Parsons with you?"

"Tom isn't the rough-house type, if it's dirty work you're looking for. Besides, I don't want to involve him. I'm sure the whole thing is a mare's nest, so, if anybody's going to look silly, it had better be me."

"All right. I'll come with you myself."

"Like hell you will! All right, I'll send for Young Ben. Will *that* satisfy you?"

"Completely. His father was a Commando, and I've no doubt he's taught his offspring all the tricks. All the same, you *will* be careful, won't you? What are you seeing Mr. Ryanston about? I thought the whole business was settled."

Timothy himself could not answer Alison's question until he met Ryanston for lunch on the following day. The producer was angry and frustrated, but began by hiding these feelings under a cloak of rueful amusement.

"It's the three ladies," he said, "who've bunged a spanner into the works."

"Not young Annabel Leigh as well as her aunts?" asked Timothy. "She was dead nuts on the project. You mean she has changed her mind? What are her objections?"

"She had only one, before she told me her decision not to vacate the house. She wouldn't let me turn that state

dining-room into a state bedroom."

"That's very strange. It was she herself who suggested that you should. I wonder what's come over her? What about the other two?"

"Miss Waltruda won't hear of our using the church, either. She's got it into her head that I'm going to stage a Black Mass there."

"And aren't you?"

"Of course not. That kind of thing is double-edged. However careful you are about atmosphere, a Black Mass, in these days, could manage to turn itself into a sort of gosh-awful farce. The only way to play spookery is to treat it as comedy from the start. *Blithe Spirit*, *The Ghost Goes West*, and all that sort of thing. What I want of the church is a trysting-place for the lovers. It's ideal for that. I shall simply let the spookery speak for itself, instead of tarding it up. These things are better left to the imagination."

"What about using the folly? Wouldn't that do just as well for a trysting-place, if Aunt Waltruda has scruples about using the church?"

"No. I want the folly for the duel, following the seduction. I can't also use it as a 'journeys end with lovers meeting.'"

"What does Miss Wulfilda have to say? You indicated that she was another of the objectors."

"She won't have her dotty sister moved out of Fivefield Hall, and I haven't any use for the place if we're not allowed to have it to ourselves."

"You mean they want to stay there while you do your filming? Do they hope to get parts in your film?"

"I couldn't say. Anyway, what it boils down to, Herring, is that, if you can't persuade them to go, I'll have to find other locations, and that's a deadly drag, because I don't suppose there's another site in England where I would find everything I want right on the spot like that, so you really must do your best for me, and try to talk them round."

"I can't understand it," said Timothy. "They need the rent money, I'm certain. Have you issued your ultimatum?—your 'either or,' so to speak?"

"Not in so many words. Anyway, they've given me this appointment, so I want to see what your eloquence can do. If you can't move them to reconsider, then I shall fire my broadside, but I don't believe in using threats if they can be avoided. Business should be conducted diplomatically, until it becomes clear that diplomacy isn't going to work, don't you think?"

"It's Annabel's attitude which flummoxes me. She's the person I'll have to get to work on," said Timothy.

"Because she's young and you think she'll be the easiest to tackle?"

"No; because the whole of the property belongs to her. If I can win her over, the other two haven't a leg to stand on. They're tenants on sufferance, and will have to toe the line if the girl says so."

"Oh, I see. Well, it's all so damn silly. They were as keen as mustard before, and I thought I was all set to begin filming in about another fortnight, and then I get this tom-fool letter to say they have reconsidered the whole proposition, and that they are not prepared to move out of the house."

"Supposing I can't get Annabel to change her mind?"

"I shall be delayed, perhaps for months, while we look for another set-up. Apart from the general frustration, I've a biggish cast under contract. There are seven major parts in the film, apart from a whole host of minor rôles—and I mean quite important minor rôles, not the host of extras I shall also use—and I've either got to pay these people their salaries from now on—well, actually, from a fortnight's time—or release them if they prefer it. If that happens, I may never get my big fish back again. All seven of them do work on the stage as well as in films, and are often in request by the television people as well. In any case, I daresay they'd

rather be working than just hanging about while you find me other locations. Then there's the director. He won't want to hang about, either."

"Well, look, I'll do my absolute best, of course, but before we push off to Netherton Fivefields I think I'll telephone my wife. She knows Annabel Leigh much better than I do, and she and her hostess between them may be able to give me a useful pointer or two, and tell me the best way to tackle the girl."

"I admire Mrs. Herring's brains as well as her beauty," said Ryanston gallantly, "so that might work, I think. You go off and ring her up while I settle the bill. I'll be in the lounge when you're through."

"There's just one thing. I agree that you want the bridge, the barn, and the folly all in one locality, and I think we could get the church if we handle Miss Waltruda gently. If so, that only leaves the house itself. It shouldn't be too difficult to find another mansion within reasonable distance. Dorset is rich in old houses. Couldn't you compromise that way?"

"I could, yes. That's quite a thought. Anyway, ring up Mrs. Herring first, and see whether she's got anything to suggest. You see, even if I adopt your idea, it may be some time before we can find this other house and make all the necessary arrangements, and time is the thing I haven't got."

Alison had nothing to suggest, but added that she would consult Miss Pomfret-Brown and ring him back in a few minutes' time if he would give her the hotel number. This he did, and joined Ryanston in the lounge for coffee and brandy. When he was called to the telephone, Alison said,

"I can't think of any argument which would have the slightest effect. P.-B.—but I think it's just a bit of the Old Adam coming out in her—says you'd better tell them about your skeleton. By the way, I suppose they ought to be told about Jennifer, if they don't already know she's disappeared."

After all, they are in some way related to her, and Annabel did come to the school just before Jennifer was reported missing. Say you think there's a tie-up. That may shake them."

"Just a nice little bit of blackmail?" said Timothy.
"Thanks!"

"Good gracious, I didn't mean it like that!"

"Of course not. Sorry I spoke." He laughed, rang off, and rejoined Ryanston. They left the blood-red Jaguar in the hotel garage and Timothy drove his companion to Netherton Fivefields and on to Fivefield Hall. The elderly servant opened the door to them.

"There's nobody at home," she said, brusquely.
"They've all gone off again."

"But I have an appointment," said Ryanston.

"Sorry, sir. Nobody left any message. Who shall I say called with Mr. Herring?"

"Glanvilliers Ryanston."

"Oh, yes, of course, sir. Would you please write it on the pad?"

"When do you expect them back?" asked Ryanston, when he had done this.

"I really couldn't say, sir. They went off this morning, bag and baggage, same as last time."

"Well, don't you know where they've gone? My business with them is very important."

"I couldn't say, I'm sure, sir."

"Didn't they leave a forwarding address for letters?"

"Not with me, sir. The post-office in the village might have it."

"And you've no idea when to expect their return?"

"No, sir, that I haven't. I'm sorry you've been troubled. They really did ought to have let you know, but really with Miss Waltruda creating about that poor dog—"

"I don't know what to make of this," said Ryanston to Timothy, as they walked back to the car.

"Are you sure they agreed to an appointment?"

"Yes, of course I'm sure. I rang them up and got a positive answer."

"Which of them did you speak to?"

"The old gentleman. He seemed quite agreeable to their seeing me again, and seemed pleased that you were coming with me. He said that if anybody could talk his nieces round, you could. Nothing whatever was said to indicate that they were going away today. It sounds as though they make a habit of it."

"I wonder whether, when Ordulf told the ladies you were coming, they preferred flight to argument?"

"Do you really think so? Oh, well, if that's the case anyway, I think I'd like to try the post-office, although, if you're right, it won't be of any use."

It was not of any use. No forwarding address had been left at the post-office. Ryanston concealed his chagrin with a success which evoked Timothy's admiration.

"Oh, well, that's that," he said. "I'm disappointed that it's ended in a stymie."

"It looks as though we'll have to begin all over again," said Timothy. "I'm awfully sorry. Do you want me to see what I can do, or would you rather try somebody else?"

"Well, if you wouldn't mind trying again? Unless, of course, I make free with the settings which are apart from the house. Is there any good reason why I shouldn't? If I can get the barn, the bridge, and the folly it will help. It doesn't much matter in what order I shoot the film, and I don't need the extras for those bits, only the principals and one or two secondary characters. Wouldn't I be justified? You see, I really was promised that the thing was in the bag, and time is very important to me."

"Well, to regularize the position," said Timothy, "and to indicate that a verbal contract is binding provided that it has been witnessed (and that's where you could call on the friendly Mr. Ordulf, it seems to me), what about going back

to the house and asking permission to write a letter? In it you could say 'Sorry, and all that, not to find you at home, but take it that I may go ahead with my plans for those parts of my film which do not include the interior of your house.' There can't, surely, be any reason why you shouldn't hold them to that part of the agreement."

"There's the church. I *must* have a ruined church, but I wouldn't be prepared to go against Miss Waltruda's conscience."

CHAPTER TEN

Solitary Purlieu

“Such men are dangerous.”

William Shakespeare—*Julius Caesar*

Not altogether surprised by Ryanston’s scruples, for he had realized long since that he was dealing with a fastidious man with whose reactions he found himself in sympathy, Timothy returned to his wife and acquainted her with the turn which events (or, in this case, their lack) had taken.

“They’ve just simply walked out on Mr. Ryanston?” she asked. “Does that mean we’ve to begin all over again?”

“Well, pretty nearly. He’s quite happy to carry on with those parts of his film which involve the barn, the bridge, and the folly, but he rather boggles at the church, as Miss Waltruda seems to feel so strongly about it. They don’t want to leave the house, either, so that’s gone for a burton too, I’m afraid. I’m wondering what else we can find him. I feel I’m committed and must do what I can to help him out.”

“I should think he’s livid, isn’t he?”

“Well, it *is* a bit of a stinker. I mean, he was convinced the thing was in the bag and that only the fee remained to be settled. I’m wondering whether we can at least find him another manor house. It shouldn’t be too difficult. It’s the church which bothers me a bit. Netherton Fivefields would

have been ideal, especially as it was right on the spot. Oh, well, my next job is pure Phisbe."

"You mean the repairs to Castell Foel. Of course I realize that you must be right about the skeleton. It could be nothing but an anatomical specimen. All the same it gives me the creeps to think about it, and I still can't get over the feeling that the Purlieus themselves broke into the tower. If so, well—why so?"

"I've no idea, but I've got to go and see them again, anyway, so maybe I'll be given a little more information about it all."

"It might be as well not to ask for any. There's some mystery there, and that, coupled with Jennifer's disappearance and this new development . . ."

"You mean the Netherton Fivefields lot and their walking out on Ryanston like that?"

"Yes. Annabel was so keen on making a little money, besides getting herself a small part in the film, that this sudden exodus doesn't make sense, and I have a rooted objection to things which don't make sense."

"Objection sustained."

"You see, I have a very tidy mind."

"Have you now? I must take more notice."

"Anyway, although I can't stop your going to see the Purlieus again, I'm not at all happy about it."

"I assure you there's nothing to worry about, and there's nothing I'd like better than to solve the small mystery of the skeleton on the kitchen floor. Even if we're right, and it's only a prop of some sort, it does seem a bit odd to have left it sprawled out like that. One explanation does occur to me, though. Do you think they always leave it on view when the house is going to be empty?"

"To frighten burglars, do you mean?"

"It does sound far-fetched, I suppose. Still, if I agree to take Young Ben with me. . . ?"

"All the same, you'll be careful, won't you? And if anything sinister crops up, you *will* go to the police?"

"On my oath, so now stop badgering me, and let's go and wish ourselves on Sabrina again and tell her how obstinate you are."

"Well, you said you married me for my cussedness, so you can't grumble at getting your money's worth. Anyway, you're being very sweet, and I think it's very broadminded and utterly grown-up of you to give in to me even this little bit, so I thank you, and you don't know how much I hope I'm wrong in thinking there might be something very nasty in the woodshed."

By the time Young Ben, Timothy's second gardener, a well-grown youth of twenty-two, had arrived at the school on his motorcycle, still no news had been received of the missing girl. The police, through Interpol, had been in touch with the mother, who was living in Paris, but, so far, there seemed no reason to connect her with her daughter's disappearance.

Meanwhile, the police, with tracker dogs, frogmen, and beaters, were searching a wide area around the school buildings. Girls had been questioned and detectives were making house-to-house enquiries. The only people concerned who appeared to take no interest in the proceedings were the grandparents—at least, that was the impression received by Miss Pomfret-Brown and conveyed by her to Alison.

"The police in Snowdonia have been twice to Castell Foel," she said, "but nothing seems to have come of it."

"Oh?" said Alison. "Then what about the skeleton Tim saw on the kitchen floor? I suppose the police searched the premises? That's what they always do, isn't it?"

"Not, perhaps, unless they have reason for suspicion, I believe. And why should they suspect the Purlieus of hidin' anything from 'em? After all, Castell Foel is the girl's home.

If the Purlieus declare they have seen nothing of the child since last holidays, that would be accepted, don't yer think? Anyway, I suppose your young Herring ain't pullin' our legs about that skeleton?"

"No," said Alison, "of course he isn't! I know the sort of thing Tim thinks is funny, and reporting skeletons on kitchen floors certainly isn't one of them!"

"All right. No need to get heated. You always were an emotional kind of gal."

"The thing is," went on Alison, controlling her voice, "that Tim thinks the skeleton was only an anatomical specimen, or an archaeological find, or something of that sort, and I've had to let him think I agree with him."

"But *you* take a more excitin' and interestin' view, do yer? I suppose he's the one likely to be right, you know. I mean, anybody snoopin' in at that kitchen window would have seen what *he* saw, so there must be an innocent explanation. Anyway, how long does it take for a body to become skeletonized?"

"What a loathsome expression!"

"Yes, so it is. Hate present-day jargon. Stop takin' me up, and give me an answer to the question."

"I can't. I've no idea. I suppose it depends on all kinds of circumstances, doesn't it?"

"Well, to call a spade a spade—which I always do, so as not to confuse matters—the skeleton can't be poor little Jennifer P., can it?"

"Good heavens, no! Of course not!"

"Then what are we worryin' about?"

"I'm *not* worrying. I just don't want Tim to run into trouble, that's all."

"He's a phoenix."

"Even the phoenix has to be burnt before it can rise from the ashes."

"Now, now! Sit still and let time pass. Tim Herring won't run into trouble."

So far as matters had gone, she proved to be right. Young Ben left his motorcycle at the school and Timothy drove him to Castell Foel but left him seated in the car with instructions to come up to the house at the end of half an hour with a tale of a punctured tyre. Young Ben, under a different set of instructions from Alison, who had not been deceived by her husband's meek acceptance of a bodyguard, was in a quandary, but solved the problem by taking the middle course with a slight bias in favour of Alison's wishes, especially as these coincided with his own views. He gave Timothy ten minutes by the car's clock, then he locked the car, pocketed the key, and walked circumspectly up to the house. There was a small porch outside the front door. He found that it had a seat along one side, so he sat down and listened.

Inside the house Timothy was explaining, with the mixture of truth and mendacity which Alison had been known to claim came naturally to him, the purpose of his errand.

"I've come," he said, "on two counts, or, rather, as the emissary of two people who have no connection with one another."

"You had better come in, Mr. Herring," said the grey-haired Purlieu, who had opened the front door to him. He showed Timothy into a room at the back of the house. "Let us converse in my little den. Sherry? Whisky? Coffee?"

"Nothing, thanks," said Timothy. "I hope I shan't keep you very long. I came back the day before yesterday, as a matter of fact, and was unlucky enough to find nobody at home."

"At what time? I myself had to go out. I always pay my bills in cash. My wife was in, though, and so were the servants, I hope."

"I couldn't make anybody hear."

"Dear me! I am sorry you had a wasted journey, and have had to come here again. Tell me, what can I do for

you?"

"Well, first of all, I come again from Miss Pomfret-Brown. She wondered why you had not telephoned her."

"But we did! I hoped that, by this time, she would have some news for us about Jennifer. We have had the police here, of course, but we could tell them nothing. Have you brought news of the child?"

"No, I'm sorry to say. Do you mean that she still hasn't turned up here?"

"She has not, neither do we expect her. There would be no reason whatever for her to visit us in term-time. What I have always expected has happened. Her mother has swooped. But how, may I ask, do you come to be associated with the school?"

"Oh, my wife used to be on the staff, and we were invited to judge the school drama competition, that's all. Naturally, Miss Pomfret-Brown told us that your granddaughter had run off, and, as I had a message from our film-producer to give you, I thought I would come along in person to find out whether you had any news of young Jennifer. Incidentally, she is not with her mother."

"Do you know that for a fact?"

"Miss Pomfret-Brown had it from the police. By the way, she asked me to enquire of you whether you know where Jennifer's father lives."

"Her father? But I thought Miss Pomfret-Brown understood that he is dead!"

"We were told that the parents were divorced, but I think Miss Pomfret-Brown takes it for granted that both are still alive."

"I cannot think why. She knows that Jennifer makes her home with us."

"She probably thinks the divorce accounts for that."

"Well, that disposes of one of your reasons for visiting me. The other, I imagine, concerns the castle tower."

"Yes, that is so. My producer is no longer interested in using a castle as one of his sets."

"And your Society?"

"Is still interested. Have you had any further visits from your workmen?"

"As I told you before, I know nothing about any workmen. I hoped *you* would have solved that little problem, Mr. Herring. Are you sure neither you nor the film producer sent the men here?"

"Oh, yes, quite sure. The odd thing is that they seem to have left their pickaxes behind."

"Their pickaxes? Where?"

"Leaning up against the side of your house. When I couldn't obtain an answer at your front door I went round to the back, thinking that you might be in the garden, and I saw the pickaxes, which seemed to be fairly new."

"The whole thing seems incredible."

"Not so incredible as something else I saw."

"Indeed? And what was that?"

"Is it possible that you don't know what I mean?"

"I am utterly at a loss."

"When I went round to the back of the house I glanced in at the kitchen window. There was a skeleton stretched out on the floor."

"A skeleton? You must be joking."

"No, I assure you."

"Oh, really, Mr. Herring!"

"I am not given to imagining things which aren't there."

"No, no, of course not. Still, an optical illusion, no doubt."

"Call it what you like. I call it a skeleton."

"Then some unauthorized person must have got into the house and placed it there. It would be easy enough. I expect the kitchen door was left open. We do not usually bolt it during the hours of daylight. Did you try the door, I wonder?"

"No, of course not."

"Rather a pity, perhaps, for, otherwise, you would have been able to assure yourself that you were mistaken."

"I'm not prepared to admit that, but, anyway, I suppose it's your business, not mine. There remains this other singular circumstance."

"Oh? And what is that?"

"That two people, presumably, took it upon themselves to break into the keep. You say you know nothing about it, and I'm certain I sent nobody, so how do we explain what happened?"

"There is only one explanation, it seems to me, Mr. Herring. Your film-producer friend must have ordered the break-in to satisfy himself as to whether the castle would suit his purpose."

"Then what about the pickaxes? Why should his workmen have left them behind?"

"Gross carelessness, I imagine. You know what these people are like."

"I wish I knew what *you* are like!" thought Timothy. He said, "Well, I've explained what I came for, so I won't trespass on your time any longer, Mr. Purlieu. Some day there will be an explanation of these matters, no doubt."

"If you will spare me another quarter of an hour, Mr. Herring, I shall be glad to show you over my house."

"Ah, yes, that might be an advantage. As my Society is interested in restoring the keep, no doubt our architect and our workmen will need to rent summer quarters, and I should be glad to see how much accommodation your house, if you still decide to let it, will offer."

"Quite so—although that is not my primary object in showing you over the place. However, please come this way. I'm sorry my wife is not at home. She has gone with the servants to market."

Timothy did not ask what Purlieu's primary object could be. He guessed that it was to demonstrate that no skeleton

was still on the premises. If this were so, the demonstration was a complete success. There was not a room which Purlieu avoided showing, not a cupboard or a wardrobe into which Timothy was not invited to peer. The whole house was in apple-pie order, and nothing less sinister could be imagined than its blameless, utilitarian interior, except that, all the time, Timothy had an uneasy feeling that they were not alone in it.

"So you see," said Purlieu, when his personally conducted tour was over, "we have no skeletons in cupboards or anywhere else. I trust you are satisfied, sir."

"Please don't take offence," said Timothy. "To other matters: I think there is no doubt that my committee will agree to rent your house for a period of three months this summer. When could we hope to move in?"

"My dear Herring, just whenever you choose, so long as you can give me a fortnight's notice."

"As from today?"

"Oh, really, that is too kind!"

"Right, I'll get our lawyers to draw up our usual form of contract as soon as I've seen my committee and you and they are agreed upon the rent."

"Splendid! My wife will be delighted."

"Oh, by the way, are your servants included in the deal? We shall need a cook and somebody to keep the place clean."

"Well, we always put the Johnsons on board wages when we let the house. I believe they find lucrative posts in seaside hotels."

"So we must make our own arrangements? I see. Just so long as I know."

At this point there came a loud knocking at the front door.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Purlieu, stumbling on the stairs and saving himself by clutching the banister rail. "I do hope that is not the police back here again! I advised them to try

the people at Netherton Fivefields, you know. Jennifer has a cousin there of whom she is very fond, and to whom I think she would go if she were in any kind of trouble."

"But, if she had gone to them, surely they would have told you? Anyway, I think it is much more likely to be my man," said Timothy. "We had trouble with the car coming down, and I left him tinkering with it."

"Your man?" They reached the front door and Purlieu opened it. "Oh, so it is."

"The tyre, sir," began Young Ben.

"Oh, so that was all," said Timothy, cutting him short. "Well, goodbye, Mr. Purlieu. I'm glad we've come to a satisfactory arrangement about the house and the keep."

"All right, sir?" asked Young Ben, as they made their way to the car.

"Yes, Ben, so far, so good, but I'm glad you were handy. I fancy the gentleman had a knife concealed in his stocking."

"Funny place to keep a knife, sir. I thought that was only the fashion with Spanish ladies and Highland gentlemen."

"I spoke metaphorically, Ben."

"You may be imaginative, but you're not fanciful," said Alison. "What caused you to think there was somebody else in the house?"

"It's difficult to explain. All the time I was there I had a feeling that somebody had just gone out of an upstairs room as Purlieu and I went into it."

"How horrid! I shouldn't have liked that at all. Anyway, what's the house like? Did you see all of it?"

"Well, that's the whole point, you know. The rooms on the ground floor are what you'd expect—drawing-room on one side of the hall, dining-room behind it; on the other side a room corresponding with the drawing-room except that it seemed to be devoted solely to Mrs. Purlieu's interests—I

mean, it had some half-finished petit-point strewn about and an electric sewing-machine and a piano and rather 'Stag at Bay' pictures and some women's magazines—that sort of thing. Behind it and opposite the dining-room was Purlieu's den, with a big, roll-top desk and on the walls some old maps. There was an old-fashioned tantalus on a side-table, with some periodicals such as the *Field* and a small pile of the *Countryman* magazine, and there was a large mahogany bookcase filled with extremely dull volumes—seemed to be mostly sermons and complete sets of the sort of Victorian novels which I shouldn't think anybody reads nowadays."

"There doesn't sound anything very strange about all that. Did you go into the kitchen?"

"Oh, yes, and into a big scullery, and I was also shown the larder, the pantry, and a kind of outhouse which opened off the scullery."

"No skeletons?"

"As you so intelligently surmise, no skeletons. So then we went upstairs, and that's where I got this peculiar impression that we were being haunted."

"Mysterious doors opening and shutting without human assistance? Could be electrically operated, of course."

"You have adopted a flippant tone which is ill-attuned to the subject we are discussing."

"I'm sorry. It just reflects my nervous reaction, that's all."

"The doors didn't open and shut, for the simple but sufficient reason that there weren't any doors."

"No doors? But bedrooms always have doors. It's an understood thing."

"The only rooms upstairs which had doors were the attics, one of which was the servants' room and the other is used as a store-room for trunks, suitcases, and junk. There is also a small tank-room. That also has a door, but—I repeat—on the first floor there were no doors."

"How many rooms were there?"

"I don't know. More than on the ground floor, anyway."

"And what about this shadowy third person whose presence you suspected?"

"It was the curtains moving all the time, perhaps, which gave me the impression that we were housing a shadowy third."

"What curtains?"

"Each doorway had curtains, heavy things which ought not to have swung as they did unless somebody had just passed through."

"Oh, I see. But you didn't *hear* anybody? What were the floor-coverings like?"

"Carpeting everywhere. Anybody wearing soft slippers need not have made a sound."

"Unless they coughed or sneezed, of course."

"Well, they didn't. Another thing which makes me think Purlieu has something to hide is that he insisted on showing me the interior of every cupboard and wardrobe."

"And this horrid house is where we're going to stay while Phisbe restores the castle?"

"No, that it dashed well isn't! It will take us the best part of a year, Tom thinks, to put the keep to rights, so—"

"But the Purlieus only want to let the house for three months, anyway, so we *couldn't* stay there a year."

"I know. We'll be having our usual firm to do the actual repair work, anyway. Once the contractors have been briefed and their materials approved, they can get on pretty well without Tom and me. We shall need to pay occasional visits to the site, of course, but there's no earthly reason why we should take up residence there. In any case, apart from ghostly third parties and skeletons on the kitchen floor, the Purlieus' furniture and pictures and books would drive you insane."

"But what are the Purlieus going to say to all this? Haven't they made it a condition that we rent the house if we want to repair the keep?"

"I've had another thought. We are committed to take a three-months' lease, but, apart from that, I've a good mind to make them an offer for the whole property. Then I'll pull down the house and build a country cottage just for you and me. It's high time we had a home from home where we could spend occasional weekends and Foel is a beautiful spot. The house is the eyesore and, anyway, it's much too large for what we should want. Four bedrooms for ourselves and guests and a small bungalow built separately for the servants would be enough. We could have a long narrow *patio* and behind it a sun-parlour overlooking the lake, a dining-room behind that, another room where you could be on your own if you wanted to, and a small cubbyhole for me."

"If the Purlieus will sell, it sounds a lovely idea."

"It only needs a big enough carrot, I expect. If you're attracted, I'll make it well worth their while to sell."

They discussed the project at some length and were in the middle of making sketch-plans and deciding where to build a boathouse when Alison, who, like most of her sex, could always think of at least five things at once, said suddenly,

"You know, there's something about that house at Castell Foel which, in its way, is much more strange than your curtain-swinging ghost or even skeletons on the kitchen floor."

"*One* skeleton on the kitchen floor."

"Don't quibble. Look, what I've just thought of is this: weren't we told that Mrs. Purlieu is a painter? I ought to have remembered that before. It could explain the skeleton, couldn't it? She'd need to know about bones and things if she paints nudes and so forth."

"Yes, that ought to have occurred to me. All the same, I did insist that the skeleton was innocuous, so that takes care of that, and everything's all right."

"Oh, but it isn't! It's anything but all right. You said there was a room devoted to her interests. Did you see any of her painting things? I know a woman who paints. She has a studio with an enormous north light, a throne for the model, an easel, lots of tubes of paint, a palette knife, sticks of charcoal, and stacks of finished and unfinished canvases leaning against all the walls. You didn't mention any of those things."

"Because I didn't see them. I never even thought about them, in fact. I think you have a point, I really do."

"And then the pictures. Did you really mean it when you mentioned the *Stag at Bay*?"

"Near enough, yes. Not that *itself*, but definitely that kind of Victorian scene."

"I don't believe any modern painter could *live* with that sort of picture. And then the books. Did they strike you as the kind of books a writer would be likely to have?"

"There we're on uncertain ground. I've no idea what kind of books a writer would be likely to have."

"I'll tell you one kind, anyhow, and that kind is some of his own. Did you notice anything under his name?"

"Well, no, but perhaps some writers don't keep copies of their own books, or perhaps he has a pen-name."

"What will you bet?"

"There are no means of settling such a bet, but that reminds me of something. Our Glanvilliers Ryanston wagers haven't been settled, either."

"We don't know enough about him yet to be able to settle them, do we?"

"Then we'd better agree to call off the bets, because we're never going to know anything more about him than we do now. Anyway, I thought we called them off when we first set eyes on him."

Alison laughed and then was silent.

"A new penny for them," said Timothy at last.

"They're worth more than that. Look, Tim, if the skeleton was one of Mrs. Purlieu's props—that's if she really *is* a painter, which we're beginning to doubt—why didn't Mr. Purlieu say so when you told him about it? All he seems to have done is to declare you were hallucinated, or seeing double, or something. Isn't that rather suspicious?"

"It does seem so, certainly, but perhaps he thought I wouldn't believe him. Anyway, the beastly thing wasn't still on the premises. I'm very sure of that. There wasn't a nook or a cranny he didn't insist upon showing me. It was all too suspicious for words."

"What do you think his *real* object was? I mean, a skeleton is easy enough to get rid of. He'd only have to bury it in the garden . . ."

"Or under the heap of dead bracken somebody had cut . . ."

"Or even among the bracken itself. There was enough of it on that hillside to hide a dozen skeletons. There must have been something else he had to convince you about—that something else wasn't there, I mean."

"Well, I'd thought along those lines myself, as a matter of fact. You mean he wanted to convince me that Jennifer Purlieu wasn't there."

"Yes, and, if that was so, he must know where she is."

"Not necessarily. I don't suppose he's had much to do with the police. He may think they suspect him of harbouring the girl, and wants an independent witness to show that he isn't concealing her."

"That's all very well, but isn't it more than possible that she is your shadowy third? You know—the person who flitted before you and left the door-curtains swinging? What do you think?"

"I don't know what I think."

"Well, there's one thought which has been nagging at *me*. According to all reports, the girl is a considerable heiress."

“Well? You don’t mean you think she’s being held in durance vile while some villain collars her inheritance! That’s too fantastic!”

“Is it? If she had to be held on to until she was twenty-one, it might seem fantastic enough, but, under the new law, doesn’t she come of age when she’s eighteen? Any unscrupulous person would only have to keep a hold on her for a few months—she must be turned seventeen, as I remember it—and then make her write a letter to the lawyers. I don’t see how they could refuse to let her have her money, unless there are strings tied to it which we don’t know about, and then the kidnapper . . .”

“Really, darling! Abduction and threats in this day and age?”

“There are cases in the papers about minors being kept shut up for years for one dreadful reason or another . . .”

“The person who *must* know something about Jennifer’s disappearance is Annabel Leigh, you know. I wouldn’t mind betting that the note which Jennifer found in her sports’ locker was put there by Annabel when she visited the school the day before. All that sob-stuff she seems to have decanted upon the forthright and unsympathetic Sabrina was just eyewash, I fancy, to give her an excuse for visiting the school and getting in touch with Jennifer without trusting anything to the medium of the post.”

“What about suggesting to P.-B., then, that it might be a good move to put the police on to Annabel? After all, she’s let us and Mr. Ryanston down so badly that she deserves a scare, and I hope she gets it.”

“Oh, darling! Revenge may be sweet, but it is quite unworthy of you! Fie, for shame! But we’ll do it—not for revenge, but just to get things moving.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Death-Like Smell

“Presently he walks on and joins them. ‘You have a corpse there, my friends?’ he says.”

Miss Braddon—*The Cold Embrace*, 1862

Timothy lost no time in putting Alison’s suggestion before Miss Pomfret-Brown, who approved of it. Soon after this he received a letter from Purlieu’s lawyers which suggested possible arrangements for the letting of the castle and the Foel house and granting permission for repairs to be made to the tower. Upon this he instructed the Society’s lawyers to make an offer for the whole property and to obtain planning permission (if this should prove necessary) to pull down the existing residence and rebuild. While negotiations were being carried on he proposed to use every endeavour to find a ruined church and a manor house for Ryanston’s film.

The simplest approach was by way of a round robin to Phisbe’s members. Coningsby, from the Society’s London headquarters, was instructed to circularize an appeal, and it was not long before various suggestions, some reasonable, others less so, began to trickle in and were sent on from London to Timothy’s Cotswold home. He and Alison made three piles labelled respectively Possible, Questionable, and

Plain Daft, and then spent some of the month of April visiting the Possibles.

Of these, much the most promising was the manor of Risinghampton, whose church was on demesne land. It was not a ruin and it ranked not as a church but as a chapel-at-ease. A service was held in it only once a month, and its vicar, whose parish church was some eleven miles away, saw no reason why its exterior should not be filmed, provided that nothing in the form of questionable behaviour was involved. The manor house itself belonged to an impoverished family who were only too willing to let it to Ryanston for a period while they went on holiday.

"Well, that's that," said Timothy to Alison, when the negotiations were settled, "and the Castell Foel arrangements are going to take time to complete so now I think we'll give ourselves a fortnight's rest and change and then get cracking."

"I'd give something to find out whether Annabel Leigh knows where Jennifer Purlieu is," said Alison, "and why the Netherton Fivefields people took themselves off like that, and, according to the servant, not for the first time in recent weeks."

"I know, but I don't see what more we can do about it. It's a police job to find the girl, and as for Annabel and the rest of them, well, if they chose to walk out on Ryanston, that's their business, I suppose."

"Something happened, you know. They didn't just walk out. Don't you remember how ill-tempered and rude Annabel was that day? I'm sure she was feeling worried about something, and I feel pretty certain it was connected with Jennifer's disappearance. I'm sure she knows something about it."

"That's mere guesswork, of course, but the police will sort her out. Now tell me where you'd like to spend the next fortnight."

"Here, at home. We've done enough chasing about."

“Well, if you’re sure, I’d rather like that, too. Do you want to ask Sabrina to come and stay for a long weekend? The school is now on holiday, I suppose.”

“I daresay she’d love to come. Perhaps she’ll have some news of what the police are doing about tracing Jennifer, and whether they’ve had any help from Annabel.”

“I think we’d have heard if they had made any progress.”

Miss Pomfret-Brown, arriving on the Friday afternoon with her dachshund to stay until the following Tuesday, had some news of the missing girl, but it did not seem to be of very much help.

“They think they’ve traced her as far as Dorchester,” she said, “but at Dorchester station the trail peters out. She took herself from school to Poole and bought a ticket to Weymouth, but seems to have left the train at Dorchester and melted into thin air. The descriptions at Poole and Dorchester tally, but the police haven’t found out how she got to Poole unless she walked from school into Peterminster and took a bus. It doesn’t seem as though she took a taxi when she arrived in Dorchester and, of course, she had no luggage with her, so far as we know. She certainly did not take any of her school baggage with her.”

“If she was bound for Weymouth she may have decided to take a bus from Dorchester instead of going all the way by train,” said Timothy, “especially if she wanted to throw people off the scent a bit. From Weymouth she could get a boat to Guernsey or Jersey, then push over to France and so get to her mother in Paris, if that was her object.”

“The police have tried everything,” said Miss Pomfret-Brown, “and everything comes to a dead end.”

“I don’t want to be morbid,” said Timothy, “but I suppose that isn’t the answer?”

“Who would want to kill her? Or why should she want to make away with herself? Not that I haven’t thought of it, I don’t mind admittin’ to you, because one would think the

police would have some news of her by now if the poor gal's still alive."

"Annabel Leigh couldn't help, then?"

"Denies she wrote the note to Jennifer. Says she came to school to ask me for a job on the staff, but couldn't manage to get around to it because I was so harsh and unkind. The police put it to me more tactfully than that, but that's what it amounted to."

"How did they get on Annabel's trail?"

"Didn't need to. The whole boilin' of 'em are back at Netherton Fivefields. Say they were only off for the day and one night when you and this Ryanston called, and can't think why the servant gave you the impression that they'd cut their stick. I've hell-raked young Potter, by the way—gal who told us about Jennifer findin' the note—but I'm sure she don't know any more. Asked all the girls in the House what money Jennifer had on her, but none of 'em seemed to know, and Fiona MacLeod, bein' housemistress and utterly reliable, says that, so far as *she* knows, Jennifer had nothing more than the allowance that's laid down in my rules for Lower Fifth gals, so *that* wouldn't take her very far."

"How did Annabel Leigh get to the school?" asked Timothy.

"In the family bone-shaker. It ain't all that far from Netherton Fivefields to Peterminster and Monkshood Mill."

"I suppose that couldn't be the answer?—that Annabel picked up Jennifer in Dorchester and spirited her off somewhere, Jennifer being a party to the doings and not, as the police may have thought, an unwilling victim?"

"I couldn't say. If so, where in the world has she managed to hide herself away all this time?"

"Have the police tried the priest's hole at Fivefield Hall?"

"Oh, Tim, don't be idiotic!" exclaimed Alison.

"He ain't bein' idiotic. It's a useful suggestion," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "I didn't know there was a priest's hole

at Netherton Fivefields, but if there is, and a priest could live in it, so could a gal, I suppose, provided she was fed and looked after."

"And allowed out whenever the coast was clear," said Timothy, warming to what, at first, he had thrown out as the idlest of suggestions. "Do you know, I have a feeling that I ought to take another look at Fivefield Hall."

"Don't be ridiculous!" said Alison. "For one thing, what excuse could you make?"

"Simple. I shall go armed with gentle reproaches. I shall point out the trouble I have been at—"

"To—"

"At. John Bunyan says so. All the trouble I have been at to find these perishing locations for Ryanston, only to have promises broken, solemn undertakings ignored . . ."

"And supposing they take you up on it, and say they've reconsidered? A nice fool you'll look, having to tell them that it's all spoof, and that Mr. Ryanston is nicely fixed up, thank you."

"I shall say that he still wants to film their barn, their bridge, and their folly. Honestly, Alison, I'm not joking—not any more. If young Jennifer has been spirited off to Netherton Fivefields, she's got to be found and the mystery cleared up. Besides, they *have* played it low down on Ryanston (and, incidentally, on me) and I wouldn't mind giving Aunt Wulfilda a bit of a facer. You can say what you like about poor old Waltruda. I grant you she's as mad as a hatter, but Wulfilda and (I'm inclined to think) Annabel are the niggers in the woodpile."

"If you're going, I'm coming with you."

"No, you ain't," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "It's none of your business, my gal. If your Tim Herring will escort me, I shall go to Netherton Fivefields and enquire for my pupil myself at this damnable Fivefield Hall."

“Don’t be surprised if they set the dog on you,” said Alison, on the following morning, as she accompanied Timothy and Miss Pomfret-Brown to where Young Ben had left the car at the front of the house.

“What, dear old Boris?” said Timothy. “He’s Aunt Waltruda’s dog, and she loves me, so I’ll be quite safe, I hope. Anyway, I thought he’d gone missing.”

“Talkin’ of dogs, Alison, you’ll take good care of Bismarck, won’t you?” said the dachshund’s owner, getting into the car by the door which Timothy had opened for her. “We shall be back tonight without fail, with or without the gal. And now,” she added, when Timothy had taken his seat beside her, “step on it, will yer? If this priest’s hole is a red herrin’ we must nail it to the mast, and the sooner the better.”

Timothy took her at her word. He made good time along the major roads and by a quarter past eleven they were passing the ruined church. Timothy glanced towards it, but this time there was no piebald procession circumnavigating it. It stood, lonely and desolate, in the midst of its prehistoric banks and ditches, as forlorn as it had been when he and Alison had first set eyes on it.

They reached the house and rang the ancient bell, but there was no response. Timothy tugged at the bell-pull again. They could hear a discordant jangling, but there was no other sound.

“Well!” said Miss Pomfret-Brown. “Here’s a nice kettle of fish! Thought they were all in residence again.”

“We’d better go off and get some lunch,” said Timothy, “and hope to find somebody at home this afternoon.”

“Very well. Feelin’ a bit peckish, and it’s gone twelve. Back about three, eh?”

It was nearly half past three when they rang the bell again at Fivefield Hall, but again there was no answer.

“Well,” said Miss Pomfret-Brown, “I ain’t goin’ to be put off now. I’ll wait here, in case they come back, while you

take a walk round the house and find us an open window."

"Oh, no, look here, really!" Timothy protested. "I'm not game for breaking and entering!"

"Ain't yer? Look here, if that gal of mine is in this house I'm goin' to have her out of it, so, if you won't take a look round, well, I will. Done some mountaineerin' in me salad days, so shan't baulk at a drainpipe or two, I dare say."

"Oh, well, if you put it like that," said Timothy, "I suppose I'll go. But we shall be in dead trouble, you know, if the family come back and find we've broken in."

"Fiddlesticks!" said his intrepid companion. "Orf with you! I'll engage to tell 'em the tale if they come back and cut up rusty. Haven't dealt with hundreds of fools of parents all these years without knowin' how to handle delicate situations."

Feeling that if the thing had to be done it were well it were done quickly, Timothy followed a weed-grown gravel drive along the south façade of the house and round to the side. A door in a wall proved to be unlocked, so he passed through and made his way to the back windows. The middle ones in the block were those of the state dining-room. He peered in. The room was unaltered, so far as he could see, from the scene it had presented when Annabel had shown him the priest's hole, but what he had not realized on that occasion was that the larger window, that which was opposite the magnificent Elizabethan table, was in reality a door. It was panelled half-way up and only the top of it was made of glass. From the garden side it was clear enough to see what it was, for it had an inviting handle.

Expecting nothing to come of the experiment, he tried the handle. The door opened, and he stepped into the room. He passed along it into the hall and opened the front door to Miss Pomfret-Brown.

"Well done indeed!" she said. "Drainpipe?"

"No," said Timothy. "All done by kindness. Do we uncover the priest's hole?"

“You do that. I’ll take a general look round. She ain’t in either of the rooms each side of the front door. I looked in and I tapped the windows and I shouted. Think I’ll see what’s up these stairs.”

Timothy noticed, on his way through the hall and back to the state dining-room, that the bust of Erik and its red lamp had disappeared, but, beyond registering this fact, he did not concern himself with it, but, closing the dining-room door behind him, went over to the table, knelt down, and applied pressure to one of its bulbous legs as he had seen Annabel do.

It took him some time, with aching thumbs and a good deal of fumbling, before he found the right spot. Then the floor between the stretchers moved away and from the depths of the priest’s hole came a strong, foul odour which almost made him sick. He backed away and, holding his breath, closed the hole down. Then he ran to the door which led into the hall, yelled for Miss Pomfret-Brown, and reached for the telephone.

“What is it?” she demanded, having joined him just as he put down the receiver.

“I don’t know. I’ve just telephoned the police. I’ve a nasty feeling we’ve arrived too late,” he said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Mad Maid's Requiem

“ ‘What man dost thou dig it for?’
‘For no man, sir.’
‘What woman, then?’
‘For none, neither.’
‘Who is to be buried in’t?’
‘One that was a woman, sir; but, rest her soul,
she’s dead.’ ”
William Shakespeare—*Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

Miss Pomfret-Brown announced that she would leave the talking to Timothy.

“Police are bound to ask what we were doin’ in the house,” she said, before they arrived, “and we’d better not tell different tales. Can leave the gal out of it, perhaps, until we see which way the cat jumps.”

“The criminal classes could take a leaf out of your book,” said Timothy. He clicked his tongue at her.

“They *should* be able to! I’ve kept a boardin’ school for ’em long enough, goodness knows!” retorted the unconventional headmistress.

The first concern of the police was to be shown the priest’s hole. Timothy opened up and then retired to the hall, where a uniformed constable was on guard at the front door and Miss Pomfret-Brown was seated unconcernedly on

the monks' bench near him. She made room for Timothy, who offered her a cigarette.

"Better find an ashtray," she said, when he had lighted up for her and for himself. She went into the nearest room and emerged some moments later without an ashtray but with a worried expression. "Come and take a look, and tell me what you make of this," she said. Timothy glanced at the constable, but apparently the man had no orders concerning them except to make certain that they remained on the premises, so he followed Miss Pomfret-Brown into the room. Scrawled across the bottom of one of the family portraits were the words *Eppie in the coal-hole*.

"Well!" said Timothy. "Well, I'm damned!"

"Rings a bell, does it?"

"I rather think so. Annabel Leigh must have written it."

"What makes you think so?"

"It's too much of a coincidence if she didn't. The last time I heard those words spoken they came from Alison, and the only other person present except for me was Annabel."

"Think it means . . ."

"Yes, I do. Alison was referring to the priest's hole when she quoted those words. It certainly means that Annabel knows there's a body down there."

Miss Pomfret-Brown tossed her cigarette into the empty grate. Timothy found an ashtray on a side table. They returned to the hall and had been seated there for about ten minutes when the police inspector joined them.

"Miss Pomfret-Brown of course I know," he said, "on account of our trying to trace the missing schoolgirl. You, sir, may I have your name and address?" Timothy gave them. "And may I ask what was your business in this house?"

"We thought the missing schoolgirl might be here," said Timothy, seeing that to tell the truth might be advisable.

"What can have given you that idea, sir? We knew, through the grandparents in Wales, that the girl had a cousin living here, and we have questioned this cousin and

the rest of the family, but obtained no information worth following up."

"You mean you have questioned Miss Annabel Leigh?"

"Certainly, sir. She admitted having visited the school immediately prior to Miss Jennifer Purlieu's disappearance, but states that she had no speech with her cousin, as her reason for going to Monkshood Mill and Purfleet Hall School was to obtain an interview with Miss Pomfret-Brown respecting the possibility of being appointed to a teaching post there."

"Well, she made no mention of anything of that sort to me," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "Wouldn't have made any difference if she had, but fact remains she didn't. Don't take unqualified people. Pay well and pick carefully, that's my guidin' rule."

"Then why did she come to you?" asked the inspector.

"Goodness knows! Gal was mostly in tears and incoherent. Some family trouble, I gathered. Nothing I could do about it. Gave her a glass of sherry and lent her an extra pocket-handkerchief and packed her off to a bed in the sick bay. After breakfast next mornin' she thanked me for a sympathetic hearin'—which it hadn't been—can't abide snivellers!—and took herself off in her bone-shaker."

"Didn't she get on with her family, then, madam?"

"Trouble is they weren't very close relatives, in a way. She had two aunts, called Netherton-Leigh, a great-uncle called Fifield, and these people in Wales, the Purlieus."

"The parents . . ."

"Grandparents."

"Oh, yes, the grandparents of the missing schoolgirl. And Miss Leigh didn't get on with these relatives?"

"I think she felt compelled to assume responsibility for those who were living here at Fivefield Hall," said Timothy. "The property is hers, but once she said in my hearing that if she turned them out they would have nowhere else to go."

"And now they've all gone, including the young lady herself. With that body down there in the priest's hole, I think it hardly likely that they'll come back voluntarily—that is, if one or more of them know what's happened."

"I think there's no doubt one of them knew," said Timothy. "There's something in this next room which I think you might like to see."

"All in good time, sir. We have yet to make a thorough examination of the house, and it is best to take things in their logical order. The first consideration is to get a doctor along to take a look at the body which, as no doubt you surmised, we have found in the priest's hole. After that we must have it formally identified, and then we can begin our investigation. I myself am in no doubt as to the identity of the deceased, since I have already interviewed all members of this household, and this happens to be one of them."

"Of *this* household? Oh, then, it ain't the gal I've mislaid," said Miss Pomfret-Brown in a tone of great relief. "Afraid it might have been, don't yer know, but it can't be, because you wouldn't have been able to identify her, would you, never havin' set eyes on her, I mean."

"You are quite right. I have never met the young lady, madam. This is the body of the unfortunate Miss Waltruda Netherton-Leigh. Of that I can be certain."

"Good Lord!" said Timothy. "Had she. . . ?"

"Been murdered? There isn't much doubt about that, sir, but, of course, until there has been an inquest, the less said about the cause of death the better. Well, I'm afraid I'll have to detain you here for a while and then I shall require both of you to come along to the station to answer some questions and make a statement."

"Will it be advisable for us to contact our lawyers before we commit ourselves in any way?" asked Timothy.

"I hardly think so, sir. All we need is for you to account for your presence in this house today and your reason for opening up that cavity."

“Well, we can tell you all that right here on the spot—in fact, we’ve already told you why we came.”

“I should prefer to have a shorthand writer present, sir, and, in the long run, that will be to your own advantage also.”

“You mean our statements can then be read to us before we agree to sign them? But I thought . . .”

“Just so, sir, and you may have your solicitor present if you wish, but it would be of very great help if you wouldn’t mind coming along.”

“My man lives in London, so—”

“I, for one, am at your service, Inspector,” said Miss Pomfret-Brown. “It will be a new experience for me to have my fingerprints taken.”

“Oh, really, I assure you, madam . . .”

“What! No fingerprints? Most disappointin’. I have always hoped to be placed on the Old Bailey black list, for such is fame.”

“The Central Criminal Court, madam. I expect, sir, that you and Miss Pomfret-Brown would prefer to use your own car, so, if you will just follow mine when we leave the house?—Ah, that will be our doctor. I won’t keep you long.”

At the police station Timothy and Miss Pomfret-Brown were interviewed separately, Timothy described how he had first come in contact with the family at Netherton Fivefields, his subsequent visits to Castell Foel, and of how the two were tied together by the disappearance of Jennifer Purlieu. He did not mention the prayers to Erik, Miss Waltruda’s perambulation round the ruined church, or the skeleton on the Purlieus’ kitchen floor, as none of these seemed to have any bearing on Miss Waltruda’s death, or any connection with the inspector’s questions.

“How did you know of the existence of the priest’s hole, Mr. Herring?” the inspector asked him at one point.

“Miss Annabel Leigh opened it up for me when she was showing me over the house.”

"But what gave you the impression that a body was down there?"

"That was not my impression, Inspector. Knowing, as I did, that the hole had been constructed as a hiding place and therefore was sufficiently ventilated, I wanted to be certain that Miss Jennifer Purlieu wasn't in hiding down there."

"You thought her cousin might be concealing her?"

"I thought there was a possibility of it. It was rather remarkable, I thought, that immediately after Annabel had visited the school Jennifer should have run away from it."

"Well, there is no doubt that technically you broke into the house, sir. Tracing Miss Jennifer Purlieu is *our* job, as I see it. It might be better for you and for us if we were left to get on with it without amateur help."

"Well, you don't seem to have got anywhere so far, do you?" said Timothy bluntly. "And you wouldn't have found Miss Waltruda's body if it hadn't been for me."

"We have yet to ascertain whether or not you knew it was there, sir," returned the inspector nastily.

"And, if I did, whether I murdered her, of course," said Timothy, in an indulgent tone. "Well, you must do your best, bearing in mind that means and opportunity need to be proved, and that motive does nothing more than bolster up a case, as it is never legally capable of proof, and so can act as a pointer to, but not evidence of, guilt. Selah!"

The inspector looked at him fixedly. Timothy smiled back at him, having decided some time ago that he did not really like him.

"You will be asked to account for all your movements since the time young Miss Purlieu disappeared," said the inspector shortly, "so that will be all, sir, for the present. I expect you would like to wait until I have interviewed Miss Pomfret-Brown before you take your departure."

"Well, I have to take her home, you know," said Timothy.

"I trust you realize, Inspector," said Miss Pomfret-Brown, when she was shown in, "that Mr. Herring and I have not yet had our tea."

"I don't think I need keep you long, madam, but I will send for tea, if you would like some. And now, madam, I wonder whether you would repeat to me your description of the visit Miss Annabel Leigh paid to you at your school immediately before Miss Jennifer Purlieu's disappearance."

"I shall not change my story, Inspector, if that is what is in your mind. I cannot guarantee to rehearse the scene word for word, but in substance it will be the same."

"Why do you use the word 'rehearse' and refer to the interview as a scene, madam?"

"For the best of reasons. Annabel Leigh was play-acting. I suspected it at the time, and I'm sure of it now. She came to school to see Jennifer Purlieu, not me."

"If you would just go over the details again, madam?"

"Very well, but what this has to do with the body in the priest's hole I am at a loss to imagine."

"I must leave no stone unturned, madam."

"Oh, well, if you don't mind what nastiness you find underneath your stones, why should I worry! Annabel Leigh came to the school in a state of great excitement whether, at the outset, feigned or genuine, I could not say. I could make little or nothing of what she had to tell me. I gathered that it was family trouble of some kind, but she was almost incomprehensible and I became somewhat impatient with her. She concluded by assuring me that nobody could help her, but that she was grateful for my sympathy and understanding, neither of which, I can assure you, she had obtained. The gal was always a bit of a nuisance when she was a pupil of mine, and I thought that maybe she was a nuisance to her relatives as well. I did enquire whether they had turned her out of the house and whether that was why she was in trouble, but she perked up sufficiently to remind

me that Fivefield Hall was her own property and that therefore nobody was in a position to render her homeless."

"And it was immediately after this interview that Miss Purlieu disappeared?"

"Near enough. She seems to have cut her stick the next day. Came down to House breakfast and went to her first classes and then slung her hook, as we used to say."

"After she found a letter which had not been through the post, I was told."

"Well, there must be some connection between the letter and her disappearance, don't yer think?"

"Can you be certain that she did not disclose the contents of the letter to any of your other young ladies, madam? It does seem as though the letter was important."

"I'm convinced she confided in nobody. I've turned the hussies inside out. Besides, they ain't depraved, you know. They're perfectly well aware of the seriousness of a young gal goin' orf like that and all trace of her bein' lorst. They ain't fools, either. They can imagine the trouble they'd be in if anything happened to the gal and they'd kept their mouths shut about something they knew. No, no, Inspector. You may take it for granted that if any of my gals knew anything they'd have come acrorss with it before now. It seems—goin' back to Annabel Leigh—that she's since let it be known that she came to ask me for a job at my school, but hadn't the courage to get around it."

"That would be her excuse for visiting you, I take it, madam."

"Yes—when she'd had time to think things over and fabricate some sort of credible story. Of course there's only one reason for her to have come to the school. It was to leave that note for Jennifer Purlieu, or to speak with her, as I said."

"That has yet to be proved, madam, although I admit it is likely enough, in spite of her denials."

“Well, to get back to our mutton, Inspector, what has all this to do with your unfortunate cadaver?”

“I don’t know yet, madam. Did you know—were you in any way acquainted with the deceased, madam?”

“She came to one of the school functions and made rather a nuisance of ’erself, and had to be taken out by two of her relatives, but that’s as much as I know.”

“What sort of a nuisance, madam?—if it isn’t an embarrassing question.”

“The only persons who were embarrassed were the relatives aforesaid and, of course, the poor silly woman’s two nieces, Jennifer Purlieu and Annabel Leigh. As for the nuisance itself—well, it did not affect me. I have no ear for music. She joined in the singin’ with the school choir. I was informed that the sound she made was discordant. I accepted the information at its face value, havin’ no other criterion but the opinions of those about me. Anyway, none of the family ever came near the school again. Didn’t care to risk it, I suppose.”

“Are you suggesting that the unfortunate lady was not quite right in the head, madam?”

“Mad as a hatter, accordin’ to young Herring, who’s met her on several occasions. Better ask him to tell you about her. Never spoke to her myself.”

“Could she have been of so much embarrassment to her relatives that they went to the lengths of murdering her, I wonder? There have been cases of that sort of thing. I suppose such people must be a terrible trial to live with.”

“Quite so, I daresay. Well, I see that it is twenty minutes past six, Inspector, so, if you will excuse me, I should be glad to get home. Young Herring’s wife may be anxious. We’ve got a longish drive in front of us, you know, and need our dinner.”

“I may have to ask you and Mr. Herring to give us a little more help, madam, later on, but I’m obliged to you for coming along. You will find *The Pensive Shepherd* a very

good place for dinner, unless you had somewhere else in mind.”

“Well,” said Timothy, when he had bespoken a table for two and was treating his companion to cocktails in the hotel lounge, “do you suppose the inspector has finished with us?”

“Not by a long chalk, if I understood him aright, but I imagine his first concern will be to trace the other members of the family. One of ’em must have done it. What do you think was the reason?”

“Could have been sheer irritation with the poor old dear, I suppose. She must have been hell to live with. She was definitely *non compos*, you know.”

“They’d put up with her for a good long time, though, hadn’t they? Why should one of ’em suddenly fly off the handle?”

“Irritations are cumulative, aren’t they? You know—you go on and on putting up with things and then, suddenly, for no very obvious reason, something blows up and, before you know what you’re up to, the irrevocable deed is done, and it’s far too late to say you never meant any part of it.”

“Me own feelin’ is that she knew something they’d sooner she *didn’t* know, and one of ’em was afraid she’d blow the gaff and land ’em all in the soup. I wouldn’t mind bettin’ it was something to do with Jennifer Purlieu’s disappearance. I can’t forget that there’s a lot of money involved. I daresay the police have been on to the family lawyers, but I wouldn’t mind gettin’ a word with them myself, just to see how the land lies, don’t yer know.”

“It might be a good thing for me to contact Jennifer’s mother in Paris, too. How does that idea appeal to you? Do you want to come along and back me up?”

“Been in touch with her by letter, of course, independently of the police, but couldn’t get anything out of her. Said she was satisfied the police had the matter in hand and that they were bound to find the gal, and that it was

very naughty of Jennifer, but asked—quite sensibly—what we could do that the police couldn't do very much better."

"Indicating that she herself couldn't care less, and didn't want to be bothered? Was that what you gathered?"

"More or less. Of course, she hasn't made herself responsible for the child for years, so far as I know. Quite likely she won't want to see yer."

"Well, she's damned well *got* to see me," said Timothy vigorously, "and I'd just as soon go there alone. I know it's really no business of mine, but I possess an inordinately well-developed bump of curiosity and I'm going to indulge it, if you have no objection. I'm going to make a pest of myself until I find out what I want to know."

"Have to let the police in on what you're doin', I suppose, as it was you who found that woman's body. You'll be wanted at the inquest, I take it, so you'd better not be out of England then."

"It doesn't take long to pop over to Paris and back, and I can't tell the coroner anything more than I've already told the inspector. Still, when they let me know the date of the inquest, I'll undertake to be on hand if they want me. In fact, if I can book a flight at such short notice, I'll contact the mother at once, if you'll let me have the address."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A Visit to Paris

“Some of those facts lie beyond my understanding. I do not pretend to explain them. I only know that they happened as I relate them, and that I pledge myself for the truth of every word of them.”

Amelia B. Edwards—from *All the Year Round*, 1863

The concierge regretted very much that Madame Purlieu was not at home. Timothy produced largesse and begged her to think again. The concierge stowed away what were ill-gotten gains and then repeated her assertion. Truly, madame had left the apartment. She had paid the rent for six weeks and had departed with her son for England. She had been gone since several days.

“Did she leave an address for forwarding letters?” asked Timothy, glad that his French was equal to the interview.

“Not with me, monsieur. One of the gentlemen might have it.”

“What gentlemen?”

The concierge shrugged. Madame had several gentlemen friends. Oh, but everything was of the most discreet. The apartment was of a correctness unimaginable. That was why it must have been so embarrassing when the police intruded themselves. However, all was well.

“What did they come about?” asked Timothy. Although he knew the answer to this, he was curious to hear what the woman would say. They had come about a young girl, but, of course, there was no young girl. There never had been a young girl. The police had questioned madame, and then they had questioned her, Mère Pichon, but she had been able to swear by all the saints, including Saint Denis, her own particular protector, that there had never been a young girl in the apartment.

“Did you mention the son?” asked Timothy.

“Oh, but no, monsieur. If the police had enquired about a son, well, Mère Pichon is a good friend to madame and would have told them that the son came every summer to spend a holiday with his mother, and that he was at college in England the rest of the time. But, between ourselves, monsieur, all this had happened out of the ordinary, and madame had been quite unprepared. She agitated herself and a few days later the police came, and after they had gone madame and the young man left the apartment also, having paid the rent for the next six weeks, and I have heard nothing more of them.”

“Did madame give any indication of why she was upset? Was it the visit from the police which upset her?”

The concierge did not think it was that. Certainly nobody liked visits from the police, but it was the arrival of the young man which had embarrassed her so much. That had been made very clear.

“Did the police question the boy?”

“No, monsieur. I would not allow them to go up without announcing them. It was my custom always to announce any callers before I allowed them to go up to madame’s apartment. Discretion was always necessary, and I had an arrangement with madame. Besides, I had never seen the boy before.”

If madame had several gentlemen friends, the “arrangement”—doubtless one of financial benefit to the

conciierge—would have been highly necessary, Timothy thought.

“So the boy was sent down by the back stairs while the police went up by the front ones, I suppose?” he said. “Did they call more than once?”

It appeared that the police had been perfectly satisfied with their visit, and immediately madame had departed with her son. They had not left the apartment together. Madame had gone first, and then the young man, so devoted, so kind, had followed.

“You know what I’m beginning to think, don’t you?” said Alison, when Timothy told her the story.

“Well, I had wondered the same thing myself, of course. In these days it’s not so difficult to pass a girl off as a boy, and the whole thing seems to have been very hush-hush. Of course, he may be the child of a ‘gentleman friend.’ Obviously that’s what the conciierge thought.”

“The police seem to have been fairly easily satisfied. It’s interesting that Jennifer (if it *was* Jennifer) decided to take refuge with her mother. It seems she knew where to find her.”

“Yes. There’s the difficulty, though, of reconciling that with the story that the mother might try to kidnap her from school. I mean, if she went voluntarily to Paris . . .”

“Yes, of course there’s that. According to what you tell me, the boy-girl arrived in Paris without an escort, so he-she wasn’t forced into making the journey.”

“May have been coerced into making it, you know. What do you think was in the letter Jennifer found at school?”

“At this particular juncture, I don’t know what to think. If the girl and her mother are in England, the chances are that they’ve gone to take refuge with the Purlieus—or is that unlikely? What about those swinging curtains?”

“I’m hanged if I know. Well, all that aside for the moment, there is one other thing about it, and that is I seem to have been right and you seem to have been wrong.”

"How do you mean?"

Timothy realized that he had committed himself. He said: "About Waltruda." So far, he had said nothing of his gruesome discovery.

"What about her? I thought she was wicked; you said she was not wicked but only crazy. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

"Well, go on. What are you holding back?"

"What has Sabrina told you about our visit to Fivefield Hall?"

"I knew there was something! She's been what they call 'strange in her manner' since she came back from there. What happened? She said you broke in."

"Well, technically, yes, I suppose we did. The garden door to the dining-room was open, so I stepped inside and then let her in at the south entrance."

"Well, go on."

"Annabel had left an inscription that he who ran might read."

"I'm beginning—well, more than beginning—to have serious doubts about Annabel, you know. What had she written this time?"

"Eppie in the coal-hole."

"The priest's hole, did she mean?"

"Possibly. Cryptic, what? When did Sabrina leave us?"

"The afternoon you went over to Paris. Why? Are you both in trouble with the police?"

"Not that I know of." He still shirked telling her of his dreadful discovery at Fivefield Hall. "Well, if our guest has departed, why don't we go over and have another look at Castell Foel? We may as well decide where we're going to build when we've pulled down the present eyesore of a house. That's if Purlieu will sell."

"Well, all right, then. Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow as ever is. I suppose you haven't changed your mind about making an offer for the place?"

“I’d like to see it again, anyway. Besides, we have Phisbe’s interests to consider, apart from our own.”

They left the car at the lake-side and took the winding path up the hill. The environs of Castell Foel in late April were extremely pleasant. The young green fronds of the bracken had superseded the rusts of autumn, the hillsides were lively with gorse, and here and there the snowy-flowered blackthorn was beginning to unfurl its green leaves.

Timothy, never idle over any project connected with or inspired by Phisbe, had already engaged a firm of contractors who were accustomed to carry out the Society’s varied assignments, and work was already in hand when he and Alison arrived. The first task was to finish demolishing the unsightly brickwork which the mysterious workmen who had been disowned by Purlieu had left standing. A couple of Timothy’s men were engaged on this, while four others were sorting and stacking such blocks and lumps of the original outside stair as appeared likely to be of use in the rebuilding of the former entrance to the tower.

Timothy had notified Purlieu by telephone that work on the tower was about to commence, and had confirmed this by letter, so, after having climbed the hillside to watch what was being done and to pass the time of day with the foreman, he and Alison took the easiest way down to the ugly house by the lake.

“I think,” he said, “that I’d be happier if you went and sat in the car while I conduct the negotiations. They may take some time if he needs a lot of persuading or wants to haggle over the price.”

“I wonder what our chances are?”

“Doubtful, I rather think. After all, he bought the house only five years ago.”

“And, even if he does agree to sell, there are the planning laws, if we want to pull the house down and

rebuild.”

“I’ve been into all that. The house isn’t listed as being worthy of preservation. They’ll waste a lot of our time, I expect, but one always allows for that. I don’t think there will be any other snags, if only I can get Purlieu to agree to sell.”

“And you’ll be happier without me? All right. I’ve learnt to do as I’m told.”

“Like hell you have! I’ll walk back with you to the car, then, and see you settled. There are books and cigarettes and sweets strewn about, and if you’re thirsty, or want to go on a bender, there’s gin and some bottles of tonic in the boot, and I put a fresh lemon somewhere on the back ledge. You’ll have to drink out of a mug, as usual, because I’ve got a horror of broken glass among the cushions, but otherwise the amenities are as stated.”

There was something besides house-purchase which Timothy wanted to talk about to Purlieu, and, as he walked up to the house after he had seen Alison settled in the car, he wondered which subject to broach first, but did not take long to make up his mind. The Purlieu household seemed to be back to normal. The quiet manservant opened the door and, recognizing Timothy, immediately announced him, although this formality proved to be unnecessary, since Mrs. Purlieu opened the dining-room door and welcomed the visitor with every appearance of pleasure.

“It’s Mr. Herring,” she said, ushering him in.

“Well, well, well!” said Purlieu, getting up from his armchair. “How very nice! And you want to begin work on the castle at once, eh? Or, rather, you *have* begun work on it. Splendid! You’ll have a drink? Do be seated. Here, take this chair. It’s by far the most comfortable in the room. Well, well, well! Your letter indicated that you might have further business to discuss with us. Anything we can do, of course, will delight us.”

Slightly overwhelmed by all this goodwill, Timothy accepted whisky and soda and unfolded his plan.

"We are prepared to rent this house for the summer," he said, "of course, but we are wondering whether you would be interested in selling it."

"To your Society?"

"Actually, to me personally."

Purlieu looked at his wife.

"Really and truly?" she said. "Oh, Mr. Herring, how simply splendid! We could emigrate to Canada. I have relatives there who are always pestering us to go."

"Yes, indeed," said Purlieu. "Have you a figure in mind?"

"A modest one. You see, if the property is to be mine, I shall demolish and rebuild."

"Oh, I see. Well, we had better not be too precipitate, perhaps. Will you give us a week to think it over and to arrive at a decision about a possible price?"

"There is something else I'd like to talk over with you," said Timothy. "I think I may have news of your granddaughter."

"Of Jennifer? I still think, you know, that she went to her mother. That is why we have felt very little anxiety concerning her."

"Even though her mother seems to be passing her off as a boy?"

The effect of this question on the Purlieus was almost ludicrous. Purlieu sat there with his mouth opening and closing until he resembled a goldfish. Mrs. Purlieu looked as though she had seen a ghost.

"As a *boy*?" said Purlieu, at last.

"Impossible!" gasped his wife.

"I went to the Paris address on behalf of Miss Pomfret-Brown, who, of course, is acutely distressed because the girl vanished like that from her school. I discovered that the younger Mrs. Purlieu was not in the habit of receiving visits from her so-called son during school holidays, but on this

particular occasion the boy, so-called, turned up at an inappropriate time and has been brought back to England. This seems to have followed a visit by the French police, who had been asked to make enquiries."

"And Jennifer's mother is supposed to be in England?—and with Jennifer dressed as a boy?"

"I am repeating what I was told by the concierge. Of course I cannot vouch for the truth of the story, and as for the camouflage, if there is such, I can imagine no reason for concealing the fact that Jennifer is a girl, but then, of course, I am not in possession of many of the facts. Anyway, I thought you ought to be told my news and my—if you like—suspicions, before I pass them on to Miss Pomfret-Brown. When I do, no doubt she will then decide whether they should be communicated to the police."

"So how did they take it?" asked Alison.

"I'm sure they would like to sell if there are no strings tied to the deal."

"I meant your Paris report."

"Oh, that, yes. I left them a bit flummoxed, I think. I don't know how good they are at acting a part, but my impression is that they hadn't a clue that Jennifer and her mother are in England, or that Jennifer went to Paris and has been passing herself off as a boy. Oh, and, by the way, Mrs. Purlieu does paint. Her studio is tucked away in the grounds. I was taken to see it as a broad hint, I think, that I should buy one of her pictures or a plaster figure."

"So that settles that, but it doesn't make me less suspicious of the Purlieus. I'm sure they know more than they say."

"Of course we've rather taken things for granted, haven't we? Isn't it possible that there really *is* a son? And can we be certain that the woman who entertains the

gentlemen visitors really *is* the young Mrs. Purlieu. Anyway, let's give it a rest."

"When do we come here again?"

"The Purlieus want time to think things over, but I'll telephone Tom at once and ask him to get here as soon as he can. The men will have finished the clearing up by tomorrow so that we can begin rebuilding the outside stair any time we like. It's clear where it started from, and equally clear where it finished, and there's a lot of building material which can be used again, and that makes it rather fun, because it's the original stuff. Some may have been carted away, but there's a fair bit left."

"What kind of stone is it?"

"Cotswold limestone, judging by the colour."

"It seems a long way to have taken it."

"Oh, I don't know. Not when you think that the sarsen stones which form part of Stonehenge were brought from Wales. One advantage of Cotswold stone, you see, is that it can be dug out of shallow quarries, which accounts for the prevalence of dry-stone walls in our home county. Another advantage, from my point of view, is that all the extra stone we need to refurbish the tower not only can be readily obtained but will be the real thing and, in time and with any luck, will weather to the same colour as the rest of the building."

"Reverting to your visit to Paris, and supposing that the boy and the woman are actually Jennifer and her mother, the Purlieus can't really be as surprised as they seemed. I mean, they may have been surprised that the two had left Paris for England, but they can't have been surprised about the boy-girl switch-over because, *if* it happened, they knew about it."

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"All sorts of things. What about clothes?"

"Very similar for some young people in these days."

"Yes, I know, but only up to a point. Jennifer would only have had the usual outfits at school. That means she left the school in girl's clothes, and, according to P.-B., who would have got the information from the housemistress, Jennifer didn't take any luggage with her when she ran away from school. Besides, what about her passport? That would have needed a boy's name on it. You can't pass yourself off as a boy if the name on your passport is Miss J. Purlieu and against the heading *Profession* there's the information *Schoolgirl*. Besides, there's the head and shoulders photograph. When did she have it taken, and how did she look then?"

"Lots of girls wear their hair short, and lots of boys wear it long nowadays."

"Not in good schools the boys don't, if the headmaster knows his job!"

"Well, so far, I grudgingly admit your objections, so please keep on trying."

"Well, the other objection is most easily stated by posing the question *Why*. What was the point about Mrs. Purlieu's having a daughter in England who turned into a son in France?"

"To throw the police off the scent. That's an easy one."

"Then there are such things as walk, length of stride, voice, mannerisms—no, it isn't possible. Whoever the boy is, he can't be Jennifer."

"Perhaps the concierge has been bribed to lie about it."

"It wouldn't pay her to lie to the Paris police. They're certain to have questioned her about the occupants of the house. They know perfectly well that the concierge of an apartment block knows everything there is to know about the tenants."

"We're not going to get any further with this, you know. I think the only thing now is to telephone Sabrina and leave the search to her and the police."

"Does that mean you're giving up bothering about everything except the restoration of Castell Foel?"

"Except for my telephone message to Sabrina, I think I must, you know. I mean, it isn't our show."

"That's what the priest and the Levite said."

"I fully approve of their attitude, as I thought I had made clear to all and sundry quite a long time ago."

"We need not argue about that. Is there anything more to tell me?"

"I can't think of anything."

"Tim," said Alison after a pause, "what are you and P.-B. *really* being so secretive about?"

"Never end a sentence with a . . ."

"Stop fooling, and tell me."

"Tell you what? I *have* told you. It is simply exactly what I said. I must report to her this odd business concerning Jennifer Purlieu. She is the person who has a right to know what I was told by the concierge."

"There's more to it than that! What happened when you went with her to Netherton Fivefields? I want to be told, and I'm going to be told. You're hiding something. Were the family there?"

"Actually, no. Look, I wish you wouldn't keep on about that visit."

"I know the police found you'd gone into the house, but you were gone a long time. I mean, I know Netherton Fivefields is a good way off, but it isn't *that far*. Besides, when you got home that night I knew that something was wrong. Even P.-B. wasn't herself, and that was sufficiently remarkable for me to realize that something was up. Please tell me. I might as well know. I shall only go on worrying if you won't let me in on the secret."

"Yes," said Timothy, "you might as well know. I'm afraid I made a rather beastly discovery, but perhaps, in the long run, it will be just as well that I made it. Nobody answered the door, as I told you, so we tried round the back—at least,

/ did—and I found I could get in without breaking a window, so I did, and opened the front door to Sabrina. I did it because I had this hunch that Annabel, or one of them, was hiding Jennifer somewhere in the house. Well, you remember the priest's hole? I tried it, and there *was* somebody hidden there, but—well—it wasn't Jennifer and it wasn't alive,”

“Oh, Tim! How horribly beastly!”

“Yes. So we got the police and they found out who it was, and then they carted us off to the police station and took statements from us. That's why we were so late back. I didn't want to tell you, but you'd have found out from the newspapers sooner or later. It was poor old Waltruda. She's been killed.”

“So that's what you meant when you said you were right and I was wrong.”

“Yes, that's it. Let's drop the subject, or I shan't want any dinner. Tonight I'll tell you what I think, if you like.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Timotheus Loquitur

"I shall waste no more words, but tell you simply how it all happened . . . The house, to begin with, was a very old one . . . at all events, it had seen years and changes enough to have contracted all that mysterious and saddened air, at once exciting and depressing, which belongs to most old mansions."

Sheridan Le Fanu—*An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street*

That evening Timothy propounded certain theories.

"Let me tell you a tale," he said, "and you may as well come and share this armchair while I tell it, because it's nasty."

Alison, to fight off horror, took refuge in flippancy.

"Will it tell

"'Of most disastrous chances
Of moving accidents by storm and field;
Of hair breadth 'scapes i' the imminent deadly
breach;
Of being taken by the insolent foe,
And sold to slavery'?"

she asked.

"Near enough, so settle down and dry up. We begin with the story of three sisters."

"I know that one. Their names were Irena, Olga, and Masha—or maybe Elsie, Lacey, and Tilly."

Timothy realized what was the matter and dealt with it.

"Are you asking to be sent to bed without your supper?" he asked. "Stop it?"

"I'm sorry. Do go on. I was only trying to help."

"Your job is not to help me tell the story, but to pick holes in it. Your studies should have taught you how to weigh evidence. Pretend that I am appearing for the prosecution and you for the defence, but please let me have my say. You must refrain from chipping in unless you have something constructive to add. All right? Otherwise you'll put me off my stroke, because these aren't facts. They're merely suppositions."

"Very good, Mr. Herring. We begin with the story of three sisters. I've got that bit. Pray continue. I am all attention. I thought, though, that I was to be destructive, not constructive."

"All right. Once upon a time there were three sisters. Their names were Wulfilda, Waltruda, and Alfreda."

"Alfreda?"

"For the purposes of the story, yes. She needs a name, although I don't know her real one. Anyway, you will agree, I'm sure, that I can't keep calling her Madame X."

"And she is the youngest of the Netherton-Leigh sisters?"

"Yes, and although her name probably is *not* Alfreda, I don't think it matters so long as you know which woman we are talking about. Well, of their girlhood I know nothing and care less."

"How wrong of you! If it's true that the male child is father to the man, how much more true it is that the female child is mother to the woman!"

"That may be so. Incidentally, may I point out that truth is truth? One thing can't be *more* true than another."

"I recline corrected." She relaxed, to his relief, and leaned comfortably against him. "It's like talking of a bigger half, isn't it? Please go on. I won't interrupt again. I only wanted you to see how closely and breathlessly I was following you."

"The three sisters had a male cousin—I think he must have been a cousin. If not, there was some family connection, I'm pretty sure, because it was intended he should marry the eldest daughter, but he went and gummed it up."

"'He courted the eldest wi' glove and ring
But he lo'ed the youngest abune a' thing.'"

"Yes, that's about the size of it. Well, the couple had one child, a girl whom they named Jennifer."

"Are you sure of this? No, you said you were making it up."

"I am stating the case for the prosecution, remember. Hear me out, and pick all the holes in the story you can, because I don't really want it to be true."

"But you think it is?"

"I think it covers the facts so far as we know them. Well, unfortunately, although Erik fell for Alfreda, one of the others wanted him, and wanted him pretty badly. I think it was Waltruda, but of that I'm not sure, because, as you will see, it could equally well have been Wulfilda."

"Doesn't it matter which it was?"

"So far as my story goes, no, it does not. To resume: Waltruda (I'll stick to Waltruda, if you don't mind) never recovered from her disappointment. It affected her brain. She and her sister had one good friend, however. This was a relative named Leigh. He married and had a daughter

Annabel. Like Jennifer Purlieu, she was an only child. As the Netherton-Leigh sisters were poor, considering their station in life, and as he owned a property known as Fivefield Hall which was far larger than he required, Leigh quixotically suggested that the sisters should come and share it with him and his wife and child. This arrangement, although most kindly meant, did not work out. Either Waltruda's eccentricities or Wulfilda's high-handedness, or both, became too much for his wife to stomach. Leigh, however, was an obstinate man. He declined to turn the two women out. Instead, he purchased a town house in Salisbury and left Wulfilda and Waltruda in possession of Fivefield Hall."

"When does Uncle Ordulf come in?"

"In just a few moments. All went well until Leigh and his wife were killed, leaving their daughter to face the world alone, except for these relatives at Netherton Fivefields. Oh, of course there was also her father's uncle, an elderly man named Ordulf Fifiel."

"How do you know that was his name?—Fifiel."

"I don't. That is only a guess. No, I've heard it somewhere."

"Why don't you just call him Uncle Ordulf?"

"Or Boffin? Because I don't like loose ends, and a man without a surname seems unfinished and incomplete. He was not only elderly but a recluse and possibly a bit of a mystic."

"Oh, yes, his meditations. Annabel mentioned those, but we never saw any sign of them, did we?"

"I have a theory that he invented the Latin ritual for the worship of Erik. I cannot imagine that the women would have been capable of constructing that pagan act of dedication, and I'm pretty sure they didn't find it in a sixteenth-century manuscript. I suppose Annabel learned Latin at school, but . . ."

"All right, she did, but not enough to matter. Go on with what you think are the facts."

"Where was I?"

"Annabel's parents were killed."

"Well, I'm not sure whether Ordulf had actually been living with them or with the aunts, but they must have been in pretty close touch with him because they made him Annabel's guardian until she should come of age. There remained the problem of finance. Ordulf Fifield had almost nothing and the Leighs left very little except a freehold house in Salisbury and the property at Netherton Fivefields, so Annabel—or, probably, the lawyers acting on her behalf—sold the town house and invested the money so that she should have an income, however small."

"And she went to live with the aunts at Fivefield Hall, taking Boffin with her unless he was there already. I understand it all beautifully, so far, but I can't understand why the lawyers didn't also sell Fivefield Hall and buy her a small house, so that she could be free of her aunts. It's obvious she never really liked them."

"That, I think, is where Miss Wulfilda comes in. Faced with the prospect of being turned out into the snow, so to speak, she made powerful representations to her niece to let her and Waltruda stay on. Not only would there be no room for them if Annabel moved into a small house, but there were other considerations."

"Money and Waltruda."

"Yes, especially, I think, Waltruda. Buried in the depths of the country and quite a long way out of the nearest village, Waltruda's eccentricities could occasion little comment or inconvenience, whereas in even the most liberal-minded town they might have proved somewhat embarrassing. Well, Wulfilda is an autocratic woman and managed to get her own way with one who, after all, was only a schoolgirl at the time. I think the—"

"Just a minute! She wasn't a schoolgirl at the time. I don't remember her parents coming to school functions,

but, if they died before she left, we should have known. Does that affect your argument?"

"I don't think so. I was only going to say that the mixture of Wulfilda, Waltruda, and Annabel proved to be too rich, and very little was needed to cause it to blow up."

"You don't think we—including Mr. Ryanston—were the 'very little,' do you?" asked Alison.

"I don't know yet. Things may have been hotting up long before we arrived on the scene. There's the business of that bust of Erik Purlieu, for example."

"We don't know that Erik *was* Erik Purlieu. We don't know that Erik was Jennifer's father."

"I'm only trying to make a connected story, and I may be all wrong. Anyway, I want you to keep on objecting to everything you possibly can. I'd like to get at the truth. Please let me continue for a while, though, on the following assumptions: first, that Erik was murdered . . ."

"What!"

"I think he must have been, you know. Everything points that way. Second, that either Wulfilda or Waltruda had hoped to marry him; third, that somehow or other money comes into the picture . . ."

"You mean Jennifer's money?"

"Well, we haven't heard of anybody else with 'great expectations,' have we?"

"Who could hope to gain anything by Erik's death, though, except his daughter? I imagine it was from him that Jennifer is to inherit her fortune. You're not going to be crazy enough to suggest . . ."

"That the poor little rich girl could be a parricide? No, I am not. I doubt whether Erik's death had anything to do with money. I look on it as a clear case of revenge. One of the aunts did for him.

"She's reminded her on a little penknife

That hang'd below her gare,
And she has gi'en Young Hunting
A deep wound and a sair.'"

"That kind of thing, you know."

"She'd have been far more likely to kill the younger sister, and, of course, in making these statements, you are not ignoring the fact that Erik's death never seems to have been confirmed, I hope?"

"I know there's this 'posting as missing' stuff. It might wash if the fellow really had been in the R.A.F. (or in any other of the Services, come to that), but he wasn't."

"You mean Annabel says he wasn't, but now there is all this jack-in-the-box business at Fivefield Hall, so that sometimes the family are on view and sometimes—for no known reason—they're not. I don't feel inclined to pay too much attention to anything Annabel has told us."

"I agree. She doesn't, at her age, need to play hide-and-seek just because the others say so. She must be mixed up with some of the fishiness somehow, and that makes her a suspected person."

"Suspected of murder? I'll never believe *that* . . ."

"Of any girl you've ever taught in a classroom? I know, but you'll have to sink your prejudices. Your personal private feelings are not evidence."

"I realize that. All right. Go on."

"The first part of the explosion, and, I suppose, the most important, was the murder of Erik."

"But—and I'm granting, for the sake of your argument, that he *was* murdered—how and where did it take place? And why wasn't there a fuss when he didn't turn up again in his usual haunts? And what did his murderer do with the body?"

"I think the murder took place at Fivefield Hall, but what Erik was doing there I haven't the faintest idea. It was on

the occasion of a regular family visit, perhaps. I say at Fivefield Hall because I don't see where else it *could* have taken place and still remain a secret. As to your second and extremely pertinent question, I don't know why he wasn't missed from his usual haunts. That's something we have to find out. All I can think is that they must have been pretty rural and remote haunts, and that when he went to Fivefield Hall nobody had expected him to come home again."

"And the Netherton-Leigh aunts and Uncle Ordulf knew that?"

"It seems probable. I assume that the divorce had taken place by then."

"Of course, if Waltruda murdered him I don't suppose she gave a hoot about any possible consequences."

"Very true. On the other hand, if Wulfilda did it . . ."

"Or Uncle Ordulf . . ."

"They would have taken precautions."

"What about the divorced wife?—Jennifer's mother."

"Tucked away in Paris, with several gentlemen friends to entertain? I imagine she couldn't have cared less. I don't suppose she corresponded with him, you know."

"What about my third point? What did they do with the body, and why has it never been found?"

"Well, if you bury something discreetly and deeply enough, the chances are that it *won't* be found for a very, very long time. I think they concealed it first of all in the priest's hole, the same as Waltruda's."

"But, if that's so, would Annabel have shown us how that secret spring works? She didn't need to let us know anything about the priest's hole, did she?"

"That is why I hold her guiltless of any knowledge of Erik's murder. I think she was at school when it took place."

"Are you saying that to comfort me?"

"No, it's what I firmly believe. I also believe that Annabel is only helping the others play this cat-and-mouse game because she *does* know all about the death of

Waltruda, and, although I'm quite prepared to believe that she had no hand in it, her knowledge of it implicates her."

"Why on earth didn't she go straight to the police, if she knew about it?"

"Goodness knows. Family feeling, maybe, or fear for her own safety if she grassed, or it could have been just general disinclination to get mixed up with the rozzers."

"Where does the disappearance of Jennifer Purlieu come into all this?"

"There I'm on even less secure ground. A lot depends upon the medical evidence at the inquest on Waltruda. If Waltruda was dead before Annabel Leigh went to see Sabrina at the school, it might have one answer, but if Waltruda was still alive when that visit took place, it might have quite another."

"You speak in riddles, Mr. Bones."

"I'm sorry. I can't pretend I know all the answers, either."

"And I can't say I think much of the story so far. I can't see that you have the slightest proof that Erik was murdered, and, if you haven't, nothing hangs together."

"Of actual proof at present I have none, but of significant indications I have plenty."

"You mean that childish ritual?"

"Oh, Alison, no meiosis, I beg of you! It was anything but childish, and you know that as well as I do. I suppose you'll say old Waltruda perambulating the ruined church with all those black and white animals was childish, too."

"Well, there are nasty children as well as nice ones. Granted that they're a minority, nevertheless they do exist. If you'd ever taught in a boarding-school . . ."

"All right, all right! It was nasty and you think it was childish. Let's agree, then, that the operative word is 'nasty.' Shall I go on?"

"Yes, please. One thing I'd like to know, though, and that is whether Erik had told the two sisters that he was

divorced before one of them killed him. If he did, it doesn't seem that his marriage could have been the motive for the murder, does it?"

"One could look at that in another light, you know. Let us assume that once his marriage to the youngest sister was accomplished, one of the older sisters remained envious but accepted her disappointment. Right? But then comes the divorce, which leaves him free to marry again. That's what you mean, isn't it? Well, we'll say that she invites him to Fivefield Hall. There she importunes him, gets him all het up and embarrassed. He blurts out—not too kindly, doubtless—that there's nothing doing. He's going to marry the co-respondent, whoever that was, and, anyway, he'd sooner be dead than be the husband of Wal or Wulf. The lady naturally takes umbrage, loses all control, does him in. General confusion and panic, 'Shove him in the priest's hole while we think what to do,' says Ordulf. But they can't leave him there indefinitely. At some point—let's hope for their sakes it was sooner rather than later—they take up the body and bury it,"

"Where?"

"Ah, that's where the ruined church came in handy, I expect."

"You think Erik's body is buried inside the church at Netherton Fivefields?"

"Not inside it, but somewhere outside it, where the ground was easier to dig."

"But, even as far as that from the village, somebody would have known. It's all very well to bury him 'darkly at dead of night,' but, where soil has been disturbed, it's usually pretty obvious, especially to a countryman's eye."

"Don't forget that Ordulf dabbles—or used to dabble—in archaeology. What easier, when they had buried the body secretly, to continue to excavate openly? You said yourself that those banks and ditches dated from the same period as Avebury."

"Then Ordulf was an accessory after the fact."

"Well, so was one of the aunts. I plump for Wulfilda as the murderess, you vote for Waltruda, but, whichever one of them it was, the other must have helped to get rid of the evidence. I now think Wulfilda did it, otherwise Waltruda wouldn't have been murdered to stop her giving the game away in one of her crazy outbursts. Besides, I don't think Waltruda could have conned the other two into helping to cover up her crime. She was obviously dotty, and that's what they would have told the police. I'm sure Wulfilda was always the moving spirit in that house. I think she murdered the poor bloke and then called on all good men to come to the aid of the party and, not daring to do anything else, and being all bewildered anyway, they backed her up."

"You're trying to have it both ways about Waltruda. What drove her mad, then? Is that the end of the story?"

"Not by a long chalk. It's only the beginning, as I see it. Mark the sequel, as Shakespeare said. When we went that first time to Netherton Fivefields and encountered Annabel at the church, what impression did you get of her?"

"Oh, she was much as I remembered her at school."

"Not like a girl with a murdered body on her conscience?"

"Of course not."

"Right. And when we first called at Fivefield Hall, how did the rest of the denizens strike you?"

"As oddities, especially considering their scheme of decoration, with witch walking-sticks, bunches of sage, charms against the Evil Eye . . ."

"In other words, like people who *might* have a murdered body on their minds?"

"Since you put it like that, well, yes, it could be so, I suppose. I just thought it was all due to Waltruda's peculiarities."

"Did you still think so, later on in the day, when we showed up for tea and were listeners-in to that appalling

ritual?"

"Erik's litany, you think?"

"What else?"

"Well, it did leave me a little shaken."

"But then came that unaccountable change in Annabel's attitude."

"When she was so rude and uncouth, you mean."

"Yes. Something had happened, or something had been said, between that visit of ours and the one before. I only wish I knew what it was."

"They would hardly have told her that one of them had murdered Erik."

"No, I agree about that. I think one of them told her something about Jennifer and got her all steamed up, and, having nobody else handy, she took it out on us."

"And then threw herself on P.-B.'s mercy and found there wasn't any? Poor Annabel!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Great Argument

“Myself when young did eagerly frequent Doctor
and Saint and heard great Argument About it
and about, but evermore Came out by the same
Door as in I went.”

Edward Fitzgerald—*The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*

“Well, you can’t blame Sabrina for not putting on a show of mercy,” said Timothy. “It would have been only to make matters worse to be soft with an hysterical girl. But cheer up. From there onwards the story takes a new turn, because I won’t be surmising, I’ll be dealing in facts and, moreover, in facts for which we can vouch because they have come under our own observation, so please make constructive suggestions, refrain from flippancy, and help me to get the story ironed out.”

“You’re acquainted with Freud’s theories, I suppose?”

“Some of them, perhaps. I feel that question should be treated with caution.”

“I’m thinking of one theory in particular. He thought that people’s slips of the tongue were a clue to their real thoughts.”

“That’s simplifying it a bit, isn’t it?”

“I don’t think so. Do you remember what Annabel said when she showed us into the state dining-room?”

"Yes, but I don't think her words were significant in any way."

"Not when she called it a mausoleum?"

"I see what you mean, but I think your idea is far-fetched. For one thing, it would indicate that she knew the priest's hole had been used as the repository for a body, and at that time poor old Waltruda was very much alive."

"I know, but it was on the day when Annabel seemed so disturbed and was so rude to us. She'd had a shock of some kind, I feel sure, and was reacting from it. Perhaps she'd heard something from Ordulf. He may have advised her not to let the house, and Waltruda may have begun being awkward about filming the church, and Annabel may have begun to put two and two together and. . ."

"Made five? But that's only surmise. Let's stick to the facts."

"Annabel's attitude to us that day *was* a fact, and I'm entitled to build a theory on each fact as we discuss it. I mean, we shan't be in disagreement about the facts, but we may not always see eye to eye in our interpretation of them. Don't you agree?"

"Well, the next thing that happened was that Annabel did a complete climb-down. Why?"

"I'm not allowed to surmise, so I shall have to admit that I don't know."

"And if you *were* allowed to surmise?"

"I'd say she had got together with Ordulf and made him change his mind. Perhaps they'd agreed she should let the property after all, and be damned to the aunts, and perhaps they'd planned that the pair of them should have a holiday in Tripoli on the proceeds of the sale. Then I think something went wrong, because the next thing we hear is that Annabel has gone off to Monkshood Mill, that is to Purfleet Hall School, to lay her troubles before P.-B., but we know she didn't get any sympathy because she had this fit of

hysterics, which, of course, with P.-B., would be fatal to her chances of getting a hearing."

"After which she wrote the letter to Jennifer, with the result that Jennifer was over the skyline in two shakes of a lamb's tail and hasn't been seen since. This is all based on nothing, you know. I thought we were sticking to the facts."

"Going back a bit," said Alison, after a moment's thought, "*why* did Annabel show us the priest's hole that day? She made no suggestion that Ryanston might like to use it in his film. Could it have been that she wanted unbiased witnesses to the fact that it was empty?"

"You go from strength to strength! I knew you were imaginative, but, really!"

"It's not I who am being imaginative, but you who are being idiotically illogical. You're now trying to disown all your former theories. It's so dishonest of you!"

"Harsh words from a high-born lady to her lord!"

"Well, let's go back and re-examine one of your arguments. When you were telling me that bedtime story about the three sisters, you indicated that unrequited love had driven Waltruda mad."

"Yes, I did."

"Then you said that if Waltruda had murdered her beloved Erik, the others would have told the police about it, presumably because she couldn't be held responsible for her actions. She was clearly dotty, and everybody knew it."

"Right. So we're left with Wulfilda. *She* was the victim of unrequited love, which is what I've thought from the beginning. Well, almost from the beginning."

"That's all very well, but I thought you wanted to argue that it was unrequited love which had driven Waltruda mad."

"So it could have been. Why shouldn't all three sisters have been in love with Erik?"

"We haven't yet proved he was murdered by one of them, you know."

"Or that he was murdered at all, come to that. I know that's going back on another theory of mine, but no matter. Let's return to Annabel. I think Ordulf had told her something which had upset her that day she was so rude to us. It upset her so much that she went belting off to the school and made an interview with Sabrina the excuse for getting in touch with Jennifer."

"I don't see how Jennifer comes into it."

"Of course she does, if Erik was her father and Annabel's letter contained the news that he had been murdered and that Jennifer's own life might be in danger."

"This is all pure speculation, you know, and remarkably melodramatic. Let's have more *facts*."

"Very well. I think we'll take Castell Foel next, because it seems to begin another sequence of events which may or may not have something to do with the set-up at Fivefield Hall."

"Tim!"

"My dear?"

"How beautifully Victorian! Going back to what you've just said, suppose the rumour about Jennifer being likely to be kidnapped didn't really refer to her mother at all? Suppose it really meant the people at Netherton Fivefields?"

"I really can't see the logic of that supposition."

"Of course you can! It stands out a mile. Look, there are two things which ought to be established. The first is whether Mrs. Purlieu really has a son, and the second is to find out who inherits the Purlieu money if anything happens to Jennifer."

"We don't know for certain that there *is* any Purlieu money. So far, it's only a rumour."

"Well, put Phisbe's lawyers on to it. That will make the enquiry anonymous. They'll soon ferret out the facts. You can make the purchase of the Castell Foel property the excuse for bothering them."

"But, darling, there's no obvious connection between Castell Foel, which is the grandparent's pigeon, and any money Jennifer may have coming to her from her father or mother."

"Well, *you* think of something, then. That girl must be traced, and the police don't seem much good, do they? If somebody at Fivefield Hall has made away with Erik and Waltruda, *anything* may have happened to Jennifer."

"We don't know for certain that Erik *has* been made away with. We don't even know that he's dead. If he isn't, bang goes my bedtime story, doesn't it? As for poor old Waltruda, there is no reason whatever to connect her murder—and it may not even be murder, don't forget—with Jennifer's disappearance."

"Of course," said Alison, "there's something we haven't thought about."

"Something which will throw one more chunk of mud in my eye? Talking of which, why don't we have a drink and cheer ourselves up?"

"In a minute. I've been thinking about Jennifer's parents. We don't know why they decided to split up, but that boy in Paris might be the answer, don't you think?"

"You mean he's illegitimate? I thought we thought he was Jennifer all dressed up."

"It seems a bit far-fetched, as I said before. And, in any case, you couldn't get away with it for long."

"What about these young women who join as men soldiers and aren't rumbled until they get wounded and have to go into hospital?"

"They've been pretty rare, and Jennifer, as I remember her, was a very feminine type and very pretty."

"Yes, well, tell me what you're getting at."

"If the mother is fond of the boy, would she stick at much to secure for him the family inheritance instead of its going to Jennifer?"

"If he's a fly-by-night, unless Jennifer's father had chosen to adopt him legally he wouldn't stand an earthly, and if he was the reason for the divorce—"

"He would stand an earthly if, the father being dead and Jennifer being his heiress, she was persuaded or bullied into making either her mother or the boy her heir."

"Allow me to draw your attention to a small but vital point of law: Jennifer is still a minor, and a minor is known in legal parlance as an infant and an infant (unless he or she is a member of the armed forces on active service) cannot make a valid or effective will."

"Oh, Tim, the girl is seventeen! I thought we'd had this out already! Once she's eighteen she won't be a minor any more! So long as the kidnapper can hide her away . . ."

"Yes, but who *is* the kidnapper? Nothing in all these arguments has established that, you know. She could still be hidden away at Castell Foel. *Remember the swaying curtains.*"

"Let's go over one or two points again, then, and see whether we've missed anything significant."

"I still think we've covered everything, and, anyway, still most of it is surmise. Suppose *you* continue with the story. That's the best way, and it may give me some ideas."

"Where do I begin?"

"That's the trouble. I really don't know. Was there anything which seemed out of focus or in any way extraordinary before we were told about Jennifer's disappearance?"

"Well, yes, several things, but we've mentioned them already. The chief points were Aunt Waltruda's mental state, the quasi-religious ceremony in front of Erik's statue, the change in Annabel's attitude towards us, the strange doings at Castell Foel . . ."

"Yes. They may all be connected, but the difficulty is to find the connection. Once we knew that, then perhaps everything else would fall into place."

“What do you think the Purlieus have really been up to at Castell Foel? What about the skeleton on the kitchen floor? What about the coffin thing you saw them taking away on the Land-Rover?”

“I know. Well, I’ve given a certain amount of thought to these matters, although I suppose it’s a waste of time to speculate further. However, for what they’re worth, these are my conclusions: I think the Purlieus found the tower bricked up when they purchased the property five years ago. I think they were only too glad to keep it that way because they had a pretty grim idea as to what was hidden in it, but, when there was the question of our wanting to restore it, they realized that the brickwork would have to go, and, with it, the secret of whatever was lying in the keep.”

“What do you suppose was hidden there?—the skeleton?”

“Oh, undoubtedly. Greatly to their relief, of course. They thought it might be Erik’s body.”

“But you said the skeleton was one of Mrs. Purlieu’s art-props.”

“Well, she could have adopted it as such, I suppose. Don’t be difficult! No doubt they soon realized that the thing belonged to the remote past and was all that remained of some dead and gone ancestor of those Leigh-Fifield people whose home they had bought.”

“That’s another thing. How do the Leigh-Fifields fit in?”

“I have no idea—or whether they fit in at all. Nobody—ourselves included—has given them a thought, so far.”

“You don’t think Jennifer might be with them?”

“If they’re above board and harmless, surely they’d have come forward and said so? I mean, the case has been in all the papers, and I expect the police have been in contact with them long before this.”

“If the police know of their existence!”

“Comes back to what I’ve just said. If they haven’t been in contact with the police, either they are so completely

innocent as to have no reason to involve themselves because they know perfectly well they can't be of any help, or else they're as guilty as hell of concealing vital information about the girl. You pays your money and you takes your choice."

"Then *we* ought to mention them to the police. The girl has got to be traced."

"Very well. I'll put it to Sabrina and leave her to put it to the inspector."

"And what about the coffin-thing?"

"I'm sorry I ever mentioned it. It was probably not a 'coffin-thing' at all, but merely some garden produce boxed up ready to go to market. I'm certainly not going to join the lunatic fringe by telling the police about *that*, so let's forget it."

"I can't. There was something so *wrong* about everything that morning. First, you wouldn't stay and have breakfast with the Purlieus. You must have had suspicions of them to go so far as to refuse to eat their food."

"Hey! Hey! I didn't suspect them of poisoning it!"

"I didn't mean that. I only meant the bread and salt idea."

"I assure you that I simply wasn't hungry. I merely wanted to get back to the school and tell them there that I hadn't any news of Jennifer Purlieu."

"And so, to carry out this laudable intention, you deliberately turned about at Betws-y-Coed and sneaked back to Castell Foel to do a bit of snooping? Then there was the strange business of . . ."

"Just one moment! To hell with the irony, not to mention the insulting implication that my conduct was intended to be clandestine and underhand! Mind your manners, girl! It was by the purest inadvertence that I mistook the turning to Castell Foel on my return journey thither, so—less impudence and more constructive thinking, if you please!"

"I was going on to say that your mistaking the turning was brought about by Fate. We hadn't had any suspicions about the Purlieus up to that point, but when you found that they'd broken into the tower, and had told those lies about the workmen, and had left the house empty, and had put that skeleton on the floor, and had taken away the coffin-box—oh, and that time he showed you over the house and you saw the curtains moving—"

"I'm sure there was someone else upstairs, that's all."

"Yes, but it wasn't Jennifer. It was either a thug or a bodyguard."

"I felt in my bones that it might be a thug."

"I'm very glad I made you take Young Ben."

"To go back to what you were somewhat rudely saying . . ."

"Well, *wasn't* it Fate which took you back there by those devious ways?"

"Sneaked? Snooping? Devious?"

"The route you took was devious, not you yourself—*this* time! Anyway, we've decided to put the finger on the Leigh-Fifields, haven't we? But, apart from them and the Purlieus, there are one or two other things to think about, which, so far, we haven't mentioned."

"Such as?"

"Why Waltruda said her dog was dead."

"Well, it does seem to have disappeared."

"She meant *Erik* was dead, I think."

"Well, the bust indicated that, let alone the litany."

"Yes, I know, but there was some reason why she mentioned it at that point. It adds on to Annabel's horrid disclosure that they used to have infrequent but regular services—if one can call them that—around the open priest's hole. It means that they might have kept Erik's body down there at some time, and that brings me to another point."

"Heaven bless and save you!"

"Thank you. I hope it may. The other point is this: you remember how horrified Ordulf and Wulfilda were when they knew Annabel had asked us to stay to lunch that first time we met them?"

"You explained that, in your housewifely way."

"Yes, I know I did, but suppose I was wrong."

"Impossible!"

"No, listen! Suppose they wanted a breathing-space in order to get rid of Erik's body from that hole and put it in another one before Ryanston took over?"

"Very well, I'll suppose it, Mrs. Le Fanu. What then?"

"Add on to that the queer procession Waltruda staged at the ruined church."

"Right. The answer, so far as I'm concerned, is still a lemon."

"No, it isn't! Don't be infuriating! It means that they buried Erik either inside the church or somewhere just outside it, as we said before. Waltruda's procession proves it."

"Oh, no, it doesn't! Who's being illogical now? And that's another thing. Why have you accepted my theory that Erik has been murdered? I thought at first you repudiated it."

"You were the one who began all this with your bedtime story. I suppose you want me to go back with you to Netherton Fivefields and look about for his grave."

"And who's going to explain to the people at Fivefield Hall what we're up to when they catch us with our magnifying glass and tape measure and we explain we're looking for the footprints of a man with a wooden leg, or a type of tobacco-ash that's unknown to modern science?"

"Well, will you agree that I put these points to the inspector?"

"No. You wouldn't find a padded cell congenial."

"Oh, Tim, it may sound far-fetched, but the Netherton Fivefields crowd are a very strange lot and we know it. Do

you *want* them to get away with two murders?—maybe three.”

“You think Jennifer Purlieu is dead, then?”

“I haven’t said so, and I’m trying not to think so, but it’s hard to come to any other conclusion after all we’ve been saying. I’m sure the police think she is, and they’ve had lots of experience in tracing missing persons.”

“Look here, then, I’ll tell you what we’ll do. We *will* go to Netherton Fivefields and look at the church again. So far as we know, poor old Waltruda was the only one of the family who objected to Ryanston’s using it in his film, so, if anybody asks any questions, we’ll say that now she is dead we thought the original agreement would stand. How does that strike you?”

“I know you’re only giving in to pacify the child, but I accept the offer. When shall we go?”

“Before we rush into things, there are two more points we ought to consider. First, where does Annabel come in? If the dark doings we envisage really did come off, I can’t believe that Annabel didn’t know something about them. There was no need for her to show me the priest’s hole. Ryanston didn’t need it for his film, as we said before. She may have wanted only to demonstrate that it was empty. That means, as I think we agreed, that she must have known that at some previous time it had *not* been empty. What’s more, she may even have known that it wasn’t going to *remain* empty, either.”

“Oh, but, Tim, if she had any part in Waltruda’s death, why did she leave that notice, *Eppie in the coal-hole?*”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Bat-Light, Candle-Light

“ . . . gives to every question an answer so prompt and peremptory, that skepticism itself is dared into silence . . . ”

Dr. Samuel Johnson—*A Journey to the Western Isles*

It was inevitable that Timothy, as the finder of Waltruda's body, should be called upon to attend the inquest on it. He was closely questioned by the coroner.

“Why had you gone to Fivefield Hall that day?”

“I had business dealings with the family.”

“Were they expecting you?”

“I believe not, but I was acquainted with them and I took a chance of finding them at home,”

“And were they at home?”

“No.”

“So what action did you take then?”

“I went and had some lunch and then went back to Fivefield Hall, hoping and expecting that they would have returned.”

“And had they?”

“No.”

“So what action did you take?”

“I went round to the garden side of the house, opened the french window and went in to wait for them, expecting

that at any time they might return home."

"Will you tell the court what happened next?"

"I decided to open the priest's hole."

"What is that?"

"At Fivefield Hall there is a hinged opening to a deep hole in the dining-room floor. It served as a hiding-place for priests when the Catholic religion and the celebration of the Mass were proscribed during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries."

"Why did you decide to open it?"

"I'd been shown at a previous visit how it worked, so, as I had nothing else to do until the family returned, I thought I would try it." Timothy gave this truthful but incomplete answer for two reasons. He was determined not to implicate Miss Pomfret-Brown, since she had had nothing whatever to do with the discovery of the body; also he had been asked by the inspector of police not to confuse the issue by introducing the subject of the missing schoolgirl if it was at all possible to avoid it without actually perjuring himself. The truth and nothing but the truth were all very well, but the whole truth would only have the result of introducing a red herring, said the inspector, adding, with a happy continuation of the metaphor, that Jennifer Purlieu's disappearance belonged to quite another kettle of fish. Timothy had his own reasons for disagreeing about this, but he could see the force of it and did as he had been asked.

"So you experimented with the trapdoor and found that you could open it. What happened then?"

"Such a stench came up from the hole that I realized there was decaying matter of some kind down there."

"Did you investigate?"

"No, I did not. I shut the lid and called the police."

"Why? You did not know for certain that there was a body down there, did you?"

"No."

"Then what made you think of calling the police?"

"I thought it would be quicker than calling the sanitary inspector."

"What did you think was down there, then?"

"Decaying flesh."

"Human? I must press this point, you understand?"

"Quite. I realized that it must be animal matter of some kind. The family kept a big dog, and there was no sign of him. Apart from that, I thought there was always a chance that somebody had got shut in down there while the owners were out—somebody who didn't know the workings and so had not been able to get out again."

"Yet you did not investigate?"

"I did not. The stench was unbearable. Nothing living, or even recently dead, could have produced it."

"That is all, then, Mr. Herring, unless there is anything you wish to add."

Timothy declined to push his luck, and the inspector was called. The details he gave were sufficiently revolting, and the medical evidence confirmed them and deposed, in answer to questions, that the body had been deceased for at least a fortnight and had met death by strangulation or, rather, by garroting, since a ligature in the form of a dog's lead had been drawn tightly round the neck of the corpse and was still embedded in the flesh. The inference was that great, almost superhuman, strength must have been employed.

Here the all-male jury looked at the elderly Ordulf, who had had the hideous task of identifying the remains, and then at the upright, outraged-looking Wulfilda, whose thin hands were clasping the handle of her umbrella, and lastly at the white-faced, sturdy, and wholesomely youthful Annabel. They could almost be seen to be debating, each man within himself, the knotty problem of deciding which of them was a murderer possessed of superhuman strength. When the time came for the verdict to be announced, it was seen that the foreman was far from happy.

"We believe the deceased was murdered," he said, "but we can't make out which on 'em done it."

"By 'them,'" said the Coroner austerely, "to whom do you refer?"

"Why, the family, of course," said the foreman, who had once employed the Coroner, a local lawyer, in a case of *injuria sine damno* and had not thought much of his efforts. (The action had not succeeded because the harm suffered by the foreman of the jury, who was a farmer, was proved not to have been caused by a violation of his legal rights, and the defendant's solicitor had been quick to point this out, so that the case was lost.)

"By 'the family,' to whom do you refer?" asked the Coroner testily. "You must name them."

"Mr. Ordulf, Miss Wulfilda, and Miss Annabel, of course," growled the foreman.

"We had better have the full names for the record, if you please." The Coroner spoke coldly. He knew that the foreman did not like him, and he was aggrieved about this, since he had done his best, in the first place, when *injuria sine damno* was first claimed, to point out to his client that the action was almost bound to fail. The foreman, looking like a bullfrog, gave the full names and then went on: "Us think we'd better say Mr. Ordulf Fifield done the murdering, him being the only man of the house, and this not being a lady's crime as we understands it, but as us can't be sure, us brings it in as the two ladies were accessories, not to let 'em off scot-free, like, till the magistrates have done sorting it all out."

"You bring in a verdict of Wilful Murder against Ordulf Fifield?"

"That be it, with Miss Wulfilda and Young Missie as accessories, being as us can't be sure, like I say."

"That man is insane!" said Wulfilda, rising on spindle legs and stretching out black-gloved hands. "My uncle is an old man, and frail. How could he have overcome a strong,

heavy woman such as my sister, who, into the bargain, had the physical prowess given by her afflicted mind? I protest against this grotesque miscarriage of justice. I appeal for bail for him and for my niece and myself, and I can only hope and pray that the magistrates, when our case is brought before them, will have more sense than to pay any attention whatever to this singular and disgraceful charge!"

"This is not a time for speeches, Miss Netherton-Leigh," said the Coroner. He turned to the foreman. "Is your verdict unanimous?"

"No, that it isn't!" said a small, spectacled juror. "You tell the lawyer the truth, Sim Stillet! It's seven to four in favour, and I be one of the four and I ain't in favour."

"In that case," said the Coroner, "I am allowed to override your verdict if I see fit. There is no question of bail being required, as the police have made no arrest, and when they do, and the charge is murder, there can be no question of bail being granted in the case of the arrested person or persons. In the present circumstances I am entitled to reject the verdict of the jury, since there are more than two dissentients from it, and I direct that the inquest be adjourned until such time as the police have made sufficient enquiries to enable them to press a specific charge. I further direct that the jury amend their verdict to one of murder by person or persons unknown. The court stands adjourned."

"Thank goodness for that, my dear Herring," said Ordulf, waylaying Timothy, who was on the way to where he had left Alison seated in the car.

"Yes, I can imagine you're feeling relieved," said Timothy.

"My dear fellow, there wasn't a shred of evidence brought against any one of us. Some of those jurymen must have been mad! If we'd had to appear before the magistrates they would have found that there was no case to be answered. Even if they had committed us, while we

were being remanded in custody and all the briefs and what-have-you were being prepared, the murderer would have been laughing in his sleeve and arranging to leave the country."

"Yes," said Timothy. "Who *was* the murderer, by the way?"

"Some tramp or burglar, I suppose. We ought never to have left Waltruda alone in the house, but, of course, we had no idea that our servant would go off like that and leave the poor girl to fend for herself."

It was difficult to think of the bloated, fat, middle-aged Waltruda as a girl, but to an uncle, Timothy reflected, the euphemism was probably justifiable. He said:

"Oh, the servant went off, did she? Would that have been the first or the second time that you went away and left Miss Waltruda alone in the house?"

"We did not leave her alone the first *or* the second time. We took Waltruda with us and left the servant in charge. She told us, on the second occasion, that you and Mr. Ryanston had called. I am very sorry you missed us."

"Considering that Mr. Ryanston, who is a very busy man, came by appointment, I think it was more than a bit uncivil of you to be out," said Timothy flatly.

"Oh, but we wrote! We wrote or telephoned or something—I can't remember—but I definitely put him off. We decided we didn't want to let the house, and poor Waltruda made a dreadful fuss about the church, and then there was the question of what to do with Erik—the bust, you know—so there it was. But Mr. Ryanston knew all about this. Really he did! I mean, we wouldn't have been discourteous for the world!"

"All the same, after he'd received your letter—it came from Miss Wulfilda, I believe—he rang you up and you yourself answered the telephone and agreed to see him. He and I came over on the appointed day, and your servant

said that you had all gone away. 'Bag and baggage' was the term she used."

"Oh, dear, yes! The trouble was, you see, that we had a sudden call from our cousins, the Purlieus of Castell Foel, and everything else slipped my mind."

"But what about the others? Hadn't you told them Ryanston was expected?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, no. You know what women are. There would have been all sorts of objections and a great fuss made. I can't stand family upsets at my age."

"Was a visit to your cousins more important than letting the house, then?"

"Mr. Ryanston had been told that there was no question of that, and the Purlieus said they had news of Jennifer."

"Oh, really?" Timothy disguised his interest in this statement and spoke casually.

"They told us she had gone to her mother in Paris."

"Oh, yes? I wonder how they knew?"

"From the mother herself, I suppose. I did not ask. At any rate, we concluded that all was well. We stayed with them just the one night and came back on the following day."

"But you still didn't communicate with Ryanston?"

"I'd forgotten all about him," said Ordulf simply. "The usual family recriminations broke out at the Purlieus' place, so, although it was such a long way to travel—we had hoped to spend a brief holiday with them—there were some Roman remains at Bryn-y-Gefeiliau I badly wanted to see—in view of the unfriendly attitude it was impossible for us to stay."

"I see. Very trying, these family affairs. Anyhow, Ryanston will hardly want to make you another offer after what has happened."

"You mean poor Waltruda's dreadful death. It is quite absurd, as well as extremely disquieting, that any blame should be attached to any of us. How *could* we have foreseen that she would be helpless without Boris, still less

that she would send the servant packing and leave herself without any protection from some roving miscreant?"

"How do you know the servant was sent away?"

"Oh, we had a letter enclosing her notice and demanding a month's pay, which, of course, we sent her. Well, it has been pleasant meeting you again, Mr. Herring. I only wish our association could have ended on a happier note."

"Tell me, Mr. Fifield, why did you all turn down Ryanston's offer?"

"For two reasons, Mr. Herring. Waltruda would not leave the church, and Wulfilda would not accept responsibility for taking her to a guest-house."

"How much of what he told you was true, I wonder?" said Alison, as they drove away from the court.

"I don't know. None of it was useful. I wish we knew more or less where the Leigh-Fifields live. They're the people who sold Castell Foel to the Purlieus."

"We should have to leave them to the police, though, especially now."

"I can't bear that. I can't abide an unfinished job of work. I know I said I was going to give up, but I can't."

"The police will finish it for you."

"They still haven't found that girl and, as to that particular plough, I have set my hand . . ."

"You're going to beat your ploughshare into a sword and finish the crusade, are you?"

"That's the idea. But, first, I wonder what are my chances of doing a bit of detective-work round and about Netherton Fivefields church without having Aunt Wulfilda set the dog on me?"

"I thought you said there wasn't a dog any more."

"And that's another thought. I can't think that it was killed by Waltruda herself. It must be her murderer who got rid of it, as Ordulf indicated."

"Then who got the servant out of the house? The murderer could never have done that."

"Of course he could, *if he was one of the family.*"

"You don't think the servant was murdered, too? Good gracious! We're not taking part in a sixteenth-century play!"

"Who's to say? When you've committed one murder, it probably seems only common sense to commit a few more to cover up the first. The trouble is that, in the end, it doesn't cover anything up. It only leaves a broader trail than before. I could recite you instances . . ."

"From the Murderers' Handbook? I'd rather take it as read. When do we go to Netherton Fivefields church?"

"I don't want you with me."

"Don't be silly! You're not proposing to *dig anything up*, are you?"

"No, of course not."

"Very well, then. Besides, I have that foolish sort of innocent face which will be invaluable if we're caught snooping where we have no business to be, so, if you're determined on this unnecessary excursion, I'm going with you. All the same, I still wish you'd communicate your suspicions to the police and leave them to get on with their job. What happened to Erik is none of our business, after all."

"Our suspicions, without any evidence to account for them, would either be laughed at or land us in trouble. I'm going to have a look-see before I commit myself further."

"Very well, if you've made up your mind."

"I'm sorry that you've made up yours. Won't you please reconsider? I'd be very much happier on my own."

"Yes, but I shouldn't be happier for you. Besides, don't be so selfish. You remember what Diana said about men hogging all the fun. And that brings me to another great thought. Talking of hogs, it's nearly time for lunch."

"Gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins."

"I don't see why it should be as badly thought of as all that."

"I suppose food production was so tricky and chancy when the seven deadly sins were invented that this one acted as a damper on the greedy, to make sure there was enough nosh to go round. In effect, it seems to me, the seven deadly sins were intended to be a check on social behaviour in much the same way as the last five commandments were. In other words, nothing to do with religion, but a lot to do with common law."

"An effort, however misguided, to keep the peace, you mean?"

"Well, look at them and reflect upon them."

"I don't want to. My conscience tells me that I am too often tempted to commit at least four of them nearly every day," said Alison.

"Really? Which four?"

"Pride, wrath, envy, and sloth."

"Oh, I'd acquit you of the last two."

"That's all *you* know. To go back to gluttony . . ."

"No, Let's talk about lust."

"Not in the car and in broad daylight, darling. Going back to gluttony, don't you want any lunch?"

"Yes, but we'll have it *en route* for Netherton Fivefields instead of going straight home."

They had it (and Timothy made certain that they took their time over it) at a quarter to two in Salisbury, and at a quarter to three they were still sitting over their coffee. At just on five o'clock he insisted upon another stop for tea and they took it at the old mill house in Monkshood Mill.

"Quite like old times," said Timothy. "Dear me, what a tiresome person you were in those days. Starchy, prickly, hypersensitive, haughty . . ."

"I did confess, a while ago, to the sin of pride."

"I distrust this meek agreement with my strictures. What are you up to?"

"I want you to tell me why we are not going to be at Netherton Fivefields until after sunset. It seems obvious to me that we're not."

"Oh, that! Just to prove a theory of mine, and while I'm putting it to the test you will remain in the car."

"Why?"

"Because (as our mentors and preceptors used to say in their sunny, reasonable, *laissez-faire* fashion) I say so."

"Oh?"

"Just that. Otherwise we turn straight back and go home."

"If I've got to sit in the car while you're testing a theory, it means you're expecting trouble."

"Does it now?"

Alison did not answer. Timothy paid the bill and they climbed back into the car. They were still a good many miles from Netherton Fivefields and the sun was due to set at about half-past eight.

"You might tell me," said Alison, "exactly what I'm to expect."

"I don't know that there's anything I *can* tell you. I've got a hunch that we'll find Erik's grave, but I also wonder whether somebody else may be on the same trail. What's more, I have a reason, and one that even *you* will appreciate, for asking you . . ."

"Ordering me. Don't let's mince our words."

"For begging and beseeching you to curb your natural tendency to make a nuisance of yourself, and to stay in the car as I suggest. I want you, when you see me coming towards you out of the church or from its environs, to start the engine. The minute I hop in, I shall drive like hell to Wimborne—we shall be facing that way, and I shall want to get to a public phone in a hurry." He drove on until they were within sight of the ruined church and then pulled over and reversed very slowly into a well-screened lane.

"It won't be easy to make a quick get-away from here," said Alison, "will it? I mean, I won't be able to see you coming until you're almost up to the car."

"I know. When I leave the car I want you to drive out of here on to the road by the church and, when you get to the top of the rise, cut out the engine and coast gently down as far as a clump of trees you'll spot down there in the dip. Pull up under them and wait until you see me coming towards you. Then start the engine, move over into your own seat, and leave the driver's door open. All right?"

"All right. Am I to leave the car headlights on?"

"Oh, yes, I'm afraid you must, if you have to wait until lighting-up. You'll still be on the road. If my hunch is right, my quarry won't notice anything so long as he doesn't actually hear the car glide by. If all is quiet, he won't even look up from what he's doing."

"Uncle Ordulf?"

"Well, I don't think he was feeling very happy when I left him."

"What makes you think. . . ?"

"I don't think. There's no logic behind all this. I'm probably as wrong as wrong can be. Anyhow, all we can do is just to sit here in lovers' lane and wait and see what happens. Go to sleep, if you want to. I have a shoulder that's feeling lonely." They waited for a very long time during which Timothy took a rug from the back seat and wrapped it round his wife. "We'll give it another quarter of an hour," he said at last. "I don't think anything can happen once it gets dark. I'm sorry I've—Ah! Wait a minute, though! Can you hear a car?"

"Yes," said Alison, "but it's probably somebody just innocently driving to Wimborne."

"We'll see. That isn't the main road. We're way off that. Give me about five minutes before you start the car. No, make it ten. I've got to be perfectly sure. Not scared, are you?"

“Only for you. Don’t go doing anything silly.”

“I never do.” He opened the door and she soon lost sight of him down the lane. She timed the ten minutes he had stipulated and then switched on the engine. The car was a good one, and the engine merely purred as the vehicle moved gently forward. There was no need to switch on lights. It still wanted nearly half an hour to lighting-up time. She did exactly as she had been told. The road, when she turned into it, rose gradually to the low hill on which the ruined church was built, and then dropped a little more steeply past the next turning. The trees which Timothy had mentioned and which he, more observant than she, or with a different type of memory, must have recollected from their earlier visits to Netherton Fivefields, were already well in leaf and formed a roadside grove about a hundred yards from the lane which led to the church and its prehistoric banking. Alison cut out the engine so that the car, now eerily silent, glided steadily onwards until she drew in to the side of the road and applied the brakes.

By the time she had pulled up the car by the screen of trees, Timothy was crouched at the side of the sandy road which led to the wicket-gate of the ruined church. He had gone to ground because, outside the wicket-gate, he could see a car drawn up and he thought it might well be Annabel Leigh’s old bone-shaker. As he watched, a woman got out of this car and opened its boot. She had taken her time, Timothy thought. It would have been better, perhaps, to have told Alison to wait a full fifteen minutes before leaving the lane for the grove of trees.

The woman, however, remained unconscious of the fact that he was there. What was more, another woman was seated at the wheel of the car. Timothy, all his calculations thrown out, could do nothing for the moment but wait.

The woman who had opened the boot took out what Timothy could see was a spade and then, having propped

this against the side of the car, she took out a gardening fork and a trowel.

"I'm right about one thing and hopelessly out in another," said Timothy to himself. "Where is Uncle Boffin?"

The other woman left the driving seat, picked up the fork and trowel and, followed by her companion, who was carrying the spade, she walked towards the church. Timothy waited until they had selected a spot in which to dig, gave them time to begin, and then, abandoning his former plan, strolled over to them.

"Miss Wulfilda and Miss Annabel, I believe. Good evening," he said. Annabel gave a slight scream, but the stately Wulfilda seemed less impressed.

"Good evening, Mr. Herring," she replied with great composure. "You have arrived at a very convenient time. We are looking for Erik. She must have buried him here. Annabel and I went over the ground here earlier in the day, and noted that hereabouts it appeared to have been disturbed. We left our task until all the farmhands would be out of the way, for fear of curious eyes, and we have now come to dig Erik up. Perhaps, as we are unaccustomed to gardening, you would be good enough to loosen the soil for us. Annabel, take the spade, dear, and remove the earth as Mr. Herring digs with the fork."

Beginning to feel that this must be part of a dream, Timothy took the fork and drove it into the banking. Almost at once it struck on something hard.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Unquiet Grave

"Mortality, behold and fear!
What a change of flesh is here!"

Francis Beaumont—*On the Tombs in Westminster Abbey*

"Oh, please be careful!" exclaimed Wulfilda. "She may not have boxed him up properly. Waltruda was always so careless and irresponsible. You had better use the trowel."

"I think it's boxed up all right," said Timothy. He felt certain that his fork had struck on metal. "I'll just loosen the soil and then Miss Annabel and I had better use our hands. If you don't mind, though, I'll have to go back to my car for a minute." Alison, he thought, might become apprehensive if he was too long away. He strolled off. Alison started the engine as soon as she saw him coming along the road.

"It's all right," he said. "I just came to tell you that it isn't a bit what I thought. We're disinterring the bust, not a body."

"We?" She switched off the engine.

"Annabel and Aunt Wulfilda and me. Apparently Waltruda buried it, and they've only just stumbled on the fact. I'm helping them with the digging."

"I think I'd like to come along."

"Just as you please. There's no danger."

"What an idiotic reason to give!"

"No time for us to have a fight now. Come on, if you're coming. We'll have to get a move on with the digging. It'll soon be dark."

"All right, but I shall have something to say to you later."

"That will be soon enough, I'm sure. You know, this is rather intriguing. I wonder how they found out what the poor old thing had been up to? I wish I knew why she was murdered—apart from who did it, I mean."

Alison caught his arm.

"You really think it's the bust they're unearthing?" she asked.

"Well, Wulfilda seems to think so, and we know it disappeared from the house. From what we know of Waltruda's mentality, it's quite on the cards that she did bury it, you know, and I suppose she looked upon the prehistoric site as a sort of churchyard."

"Well, it *is* the churchyard now."

They joined Wulfilda and Annabel.

"I don't know when she could have found the opportunity to bury it. It must have been that day we were out," said Wulfilda. "Fortunately, it isn't very deep down." She and her niece had uncovered the top of the box. "I'm afraid we shall have to rely upon your muscles to help us lift it up, Mr. Herring."

"I'll help," said Annabel. "If we each take an end we should be able to manage, I think."

"Just a minute," said Timothy. "Lend me your trowel." He took it from Wulfilda's thin hand. "Here, Alison, take this torch and shine it on to this end of the box." He worked away, using the trowel and then his hands. At last, when he had removed the soil from around the box so that there was a good two-inch clearance, he stood up. "We're not going to do any more tonight," he said. "Go back to the car, Alison. You know what to do. I shall stay here until they arrive."

Alison asked no question. She went back to where she had left the car, gave a couple of toots on the horn and they heard her drive off.

"Are we not going to lift up the box? It is our right to do so," said Wulfilda. "Moreover, it is on our land."

"On *my* land," amended Annabel. "Yes, what's the . . . Oh, I say! It does look rather like a coffin, doesn't it?"

"Which is why it must stay where it is until the police arrive," said Timothy. "You must forgive me if I seem to be high-handed, but a member of your family has disappeared without trace and—as a matter of fact—I'm almost certain I've seen this box before."

"And how long are we to wait here at your pleasure, Mr. Herring?" asked Wulfilda coldly. "And what, I wonder, is in your mind? As for the box, how can you have seen it before? It has been buried in our garden until—well, for some time now, if you wish to know."

"Uncle Ordulf found it had gone," said Annabel. "Aunt Waltruda was so fond of Boris."

Timothy could make nothing at all of this. He turned to Wulfilda.

"I did ask your forgiveness for laying down the law. There is no need for you and Miss Annabel to hang about. It's getting darker and it's turning cold," he said.

"I am obliged to you for the information. I had already remarked these phenomena for myself."

"Let me drive you home, Aunt Wulfilda," suggested Annabel. "It won't take ten minutes. I'll come back as soon as I've parked you in the house."

"And leave this man here, unsupervised?"

"I'll promise not to make off with the box, or prise it open, or anything," said Timothy meekly, "and I would be very sorry indeed, Miss Wulfilda, if you took cold."

"I thank you, I am hardy enough, and I have no intention whatever of leaving you here alone."

“Good. I’ll be glad of some company. Remarkably spooky around this area at night, wouldn’t you say? Bats in the belfry, ghosts in the nave, singing in the chancel, and the devil at the grave, eh, what!!”

Miss Wulfilda sniffed at this ill-timed pleasantry and intimated to Annabel that she thought she would go and sit in their car.

“It commands the entrance to this place,” she added, meaningly. Left alone with Timothy at the edge of the new excavation, Annabel said,

“So it’s the police, is it? Well, I’ll tell you one thing if you’ll tell me another.”

“Toss for innings, then,” said Timothy. He put his fingers into his jacket pocket and then put both hands behind his back. “Which hand will you have?” He held out two clenched fists. Annabel tapped the right hand. It was empty.

“You’re cheating! Now open the other one,” she said. Timothy did so, and displayed a small bright coin. “Bother you!” said Annabel. “I felt sure both your hands were empty.”

“A schoolboy’s trick which it would be beneath my dignity to try out on you. Anyway, I’ve won, so what are you going to tell me?”

“That, whatever you think might be in that box, it isn’t Jennifer. You see, I know where she is.”

“I thought perhaps you did. Is it of any use to ask you . . .”

“Not yet, but she’s alive and well, so far as I know.”

“I think that, as I was the winner, you might come up with chapter and verse—i.e., where is she, and how do you know she’s alive and well?”

“I’ll tell you later. Now it’s my turn. Why, as soon as you saw the box, did you send for the police? Because you thought it was Jennifer’s coffin? You should have asked me first, and then perhaps you need not have sent your wife off on a wild-goose chase.”

"You haven't asked the question I expected."

"And what is that? Oh, I know! I'll ask it now, if you like. What made you think you'd seen the box before?"

"Just one of those things. You know how it is."

"I mean, *where* did you think you'd seen it?"

"A gleam of intelligence at last! Well, as a matter of fact, I'm almost certain I saw it being loaded on to an estate car at Castell Foel."

"What! You couldn't have done!"

"Why couldn't I?"

"When was this?"

"Soon after your cousin ran away from school. You were all mixed up in that, weren't you?"

"You may keep on guessing."

"What made you turn so blue on us that day you took us over the Netherton Fivefields estate?"

"It's just a way they have in the Navy. I was upset."

"But then you took it all back afterwards."

"I didn't want to get wrong with Marchmont—with Mrs. Herring. I told you I had a crush on her at school."

"Isn't that expression *démodé*?"

"Yes. So is the attitude it indicates."

"Why did you and your aunts throw down poor old Ryanston just when he thought his film sets were in the bag? Did Aunt Waltruda rule the lot of you?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. We just changed our minds, that's all. Woman's prerogative, isn't it?"

"I thought—excuse a little plain speaking—that you badly needed the money."

"Not now Aunt Wallie's gone."

Timothy was about to ask for an elucidation of this extraordinary and unexpected explanation when Wulfilda left the car and came up to them.

"I think, after all, you had better drive me home, Annabel," she said. "If Mr. Herring has sent for the police, he

may stay and cope with them himself. I take it that he will return Erik to us intact and in due course."

"In due course, and intact, I hope," said Timothy. He paused. "So *that's* who's in the box, is it? Good lord! That explains a lot!"

"I'll be right back, you needn't worry," said Annabel, ignoring this. "I can't wait to hear what the inspector will say when he opens that box and finds the bust. I should think you'll feel pretty silly when *that* happens."

"The bust? Only the bust?" said Timothy. He sounded genuinely apprehensive. "Don't push your luck, wench! You never know when the lightly spoken word, like those ill-omened chickens, will come home to roost." He did not notice, until their car was out of sight, that they had left their tools behind them. The evening, which was darkening rapidly, was becoming extremely chilly. He had just picked up the gardening fork with the intention of widening the trench round the iron box so that it could be lifted out more easily, when he heard the sound of his own car. He put down the fork and walked towards the road.

"They're coming," said Alison. "Where is the other car?"

"Miss Wulfilda decided, after all, to go home. What did the police have to say?"

"Nothing much. Thanked me for ringing and asked me for the exact location and said that they would come as soon as they could."

Timothy got in beside her and they settled down to wait, but they had not been together for more than about ten minutes when Annabel drove up. She parked her car at the entrance to the enclosure and then came over to them.

"Mind if I occupy your back seat until the police arrive?" she asked. She opened the door and scrambled in. "What did you really expect them to find? Treasure trove? I wouldn't bank on it, you know, and, even if they do, it belongs to me. It's on my land and you wouldn't have known anything about it if Aunt Ildie and I . . ."

"Stop babbling, girl," said Timothy, "and answer the sixty-four thousand dollar question. Where is your cousin Jennifer?"

"With her idiotic mum, I suppose. That's where she was headed when I put her on the boat for Jersey."

"She did go to Weymouth, then?"

"Oh, yes. She sneaked away from school according to plan, I picked her up in Peterminster, drove her to Poole station, saw the train pull out, picked her up again in Dorchester, drove her to Weymouth and shipped her off. From Jersey I take it she flew to France, and that's as much as I know."

"And why did you go to all this trouble?" asked Timothy. "Do we get chapter and verse?"

"No, you don't. At any rate, you don't get them from me."

"On the principle that it's a dirty bird that fouls its own nest?"

"If you like. I'm not saying any more."

"Would you like *me* to say something?"

"I'd love it, but you won't get me to confirm or deny anything, or even discuss it."

"Fair enough. Let me give you a résumé of the events which have led up to this evening's happy encounter. Are you listening?"

"With twitched ears, but I'm not in the mood for fairy tales."

"Annabel!" said Alison suddenly, on a note which Timothy had never heard from her before.

"Yes, Miss Pallis?—er—Mrs. Herring?"

"What do *you* think the police will find when they get here?"

"The three of us, I suppose, and the iron box. What else?"

"That's what I'm asking you."

"Well, not 'a ship, an isle, a sickle moon,'" said Annabel pertly, recovering from her schoolgirl lapse. "What were you saying, Mr. Herring?"

"Nothing that matters. I was going to tell you a tale, but I've changed my mind," said Timothy. "And if you're rude to my wife I shall drag you out of that back seat and bash you."

"Oh, all right. I'm sorry, Mrs. Herring. Anyway, you were the one who scored. I thought for half a second I was back in school and at your mercy. Just a childish reaction."

"A good many of your reactions are childish," said Alison. "Why were you so rude to us on that previous occasion? I'm sure you remember the one I mean."

"I've apologized for that."

"Yes, but you haven't explained it."

"Oh, I'd had a worrying time the night before. There was that argument, that's all."

"I should think, with your Aunt Waltruda in the house, you had a good many worrying times. Won't you tell us about this one?" Alison had changed her tone and spoke, but there was no chance for Annabel to reply, for at this moment the police car pulled up and the inspector, whom Annabel recognized, as she had met him more than once at Fivefield Hall, came up to Timothy's window.

"Mr. Herring, sir?"

"Yes. My wife telephoned you."

"Evening, madam. Evening, Miss Leigh. Do you mind stepping out of your car, sir, and showing me what you've found?"

"I'll come, too," said Annabel. "It wasn't Mr. Herring who actually found the box. My aunt and I were beginning to dig it up when he came along. I'm afraid you're on a wild-goose chase. I know what's in the box, and it's not going to interest you one tiny little bit."

"Very good, then, miss, if you'd care to lead the way."

It was not difficult to lift out the iron box, for Timothy and the two women had done most of the work. The inspector and his sergeant soon had it out on the grass. It looked much less like a coffin than Timothy had imagined, and appeared to be neither more nor less than a long, narrow iron trunk padlocked in two places. It was scarcely rusted at all, and, having surveyed it, the inspector suggested that, as no keys appeared to be available, he thought it would be best to convey it to the police station and open it there.

"I'd like to go along with you," said Annabel. "It's my property, after all."

"That's as may be, miss. You say you know what's inside?"

"Yes, a bust of a relative of mine—a statue, you know."

"What makes you think so, miss?"

"Well, it's disappeared from the house, and knowing what I do about my aunt—the one who is dead—I think she buried it here. She was quite insane, and it's just the sort of crazy thing she'd think of."

"So we have been told, miss, and, as you know, we are still making enquiries respecting her death. What would this bust be made of?"

"Only plaster, I believe."

"Quite so, miss. Well, if you'd care to come along to the station we'll see whether you are right. Perhaps you'd like to come too, sir."

"All right," said Timothy. The inspector and the sergeant carried the box to the police car, but it was too long to be taken aboard.

"Have to leave you with it, Munnings," said the inspector to his sergeant, "while I rustle up a van."

"Can't you leave it until morning?" suggested Annabel. "We can't hang about all night."

"It was your own suggestion you should come to the station, miss. We have your address, and if the contents

should be as you say, we'll take every care of your statue and return it to you tomorrow. As for you, sir, I don't quite see how you come into the picture, so, just in case the young lady is mistaken . . ."

"Very well, Inspector. Just a word to my wife." He stepped over to his car. Alison let down the driver's window. "Look," he said, "I've got to go along with the rozzers sort of voluntary-compulsory. Will you drive to the school and ask Sabrina for a bed? I'll join you as soon as I can. I haven't the least idea how long the police will keep me, and I don't want you to have to hang about."

"Must you go with them? What about Annabel?"

"She's opted out. They know where to find her if they want her. The inspector will want to know how I happened upon the scene, I expect. Anyway, they're going to open the thing at the police station and I badly yearn to know what's inside it. Don't worry. The inspector will get me a taxi to make it to school when we're through."

He saw her drive off and then returned to the police car. At the station he was given a chair while the inspector was driven off again in an official van. He returned in about an hour and the iron box was taken past where Timothy was seated and conveyed into the inspector's office. Tools were brought. Timothy looked at his watch. The telephone rang. A policeman took the call and looked across at him.

"Mr. Herring?"

"Yes?"

"For you sir." It was Alison, announcing her safe arrival at the school.

"And P.-B. says you're to come along as soon as you're ready. We are to have the guest-room in her quarters and breakfast in bed tomorrow morning."

He had scarcely put down the receiver when the inspector emerged.

"Perhaps you'd come in here, sir," he said.

"What an age you've been," said Alison. "There's a grand cold collation and a bottle of wine laid out for you in the staff dining-room, so come along. You must be famished. I'll sit and watch you eat, and then we'll join P.-B. in her sitting-room and you can tell us all about it."

"Not sure I'm very hungry."

"Does that mean. . . ? No, don't tell me now. She'll be awfully disappointed if you don't eat something, and the wine is rather special."

When they were in Miss Pomfret-Brown's luxurious quarters, Timothy leaned back in a large armchair and said,

"Well, the bust was there all right. I've promised to go back to the inspector tomorrow morning. It wasn't only the bust that turned up, you see."

"You don't mean. . . ?" demanded Miss Pomfret-Brown.

"No, not Jennifer, thank God. In the box with the bust was a very dead dog. Moreover, it had previously been laid in a stony grave before it got into the churchyard. The inspector also concludes that it was poisoned."

"So she *did* kill Boris!" said Alison.

"Well, somebody did, but that's not all. I don't know whether you know it, but we left the sergeant on guard while we went to the police station. The inspector opted for a van because the box was too big to be put into his car. Well, to while away the time until the van turned up, the sergeant seems to have decided to deepen the excavation. Says something made him suspicious. Anyhow, he dug a good bit deeper and, not to put too fine a point on it, he may have lighted upon Erik—the real Erik this time. I didn't have to view the remains, I'm glad to say—Boris was quite enough for me!—but I think I've been put on the inspector's little list and, as I told you, I've got to go and see him again tomorrow."

"What on earth does he think you can tell him?"

"Well, he thinks I have a very fish-like smell. In other words, he thinks I'm stretching my talent for discovering

dead bodies just a little too far. First Waltruda and now Erik does seem to be overdoing things. I don't like the chap, but I can see his point of view."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Other Family

“‘O Mistress Mouse, are you within?
Oh, if you are, I pray, come down—
With a roly poly gammon and spinach,
Heigh-ho!’ says Anthony Rowley.”

Folk Song—*The Frog and the Mouse*

“So you told the police everything, of course,” said Alison, late on the following night.

“Yes, everything. Right from the very beginning. I felt I had to.”

“Mr. Ryanston and all?”

“Yes. I thought I’d better account for my interest in the people at Fivefield Hall.”

“How I wish we’d never heard of Mr. Ryanston and his beastly film.”

“I hate to remind you . . .”

“Oh, I know you didn’t want to have anything to do with him! *Please* don’t crow.”

“I wouldn’t be so ungentlemanly.”

“So what happens next? Have the police finished with you?”

“I think so. Well, more or less. The inspector unfroze a little at the end of our very lengthy interview, but I’ve been warned, I rather think, not to leave the country.”

"Are we allowed to go home?"

"I suppose so. I've left him my address. First things first, though, and you know what I'm going to say."

"You're not *still* going on with the search for Jennifer Purlieu?"

"Why not? There's one thing we haven't tried yet. I want to track down the Leigh-Fifields."

"Oh, Tim, why? I wish you'd leave it alone."

"Not until I've tried everything. I'm persistent. If I hadn't been a very persistent man, I don't believe you'd have married me. Well, for what it's worth, I'm not going to throw in my hand about young Jennifer. I'm ashamed I ever thought of doing so."

"What makes you think the Leigh-Fifields can help?"

"I don't think they can, but I've got to try everything. Unless that kid's dead, she must be with somebody. If she was on her own and unprotected, the police would have tracked her down by now. Somebody's hiding her away or shielding her."

"Dozens of people disappear every year and are never traced."

"Mostly because nobody particularly wants them found, I expect, and, anyway, they wouldn't be minors. The police go to endless trouble to find a missing youngster, and I'm prepared to do the same."

"Well, I don't suppose the Leigh-Fifields know anything about Jennifer. Why should they? Besides, what excuse can we make for bothering them? They'll know it isn't really our business."

"I've thought of that. I have formulated a perfectly legitimate excuse for calling on them. You know, what with that unexplained action of unbricking the tower and Purlieu's being so anxious to show me, that time I went, that nobody was concealed on his premises, and two of them carrying off that iron box which has turned up again in such unlikely circumstances and with such unusual contents, I've

become rather allergic to Purlieu. I'm going to ask the Leigh-Fifield chap whether the deeds of Castell Foel really are in Purlieu's possession. Any comments?"

"No, I don't think so. He can hardly take exception to that, so long as you phrase it discreetly."

"That's what I think. I shall go prepared to talk figures."

"But Mr. Purlieu hasn't suggested a figure, has he?"

"No. I shall probably invent one, and ask Leigh-Fifield what he thinks of it."

"With what object, may I ask?"

"Just to find out what happens when I name a price which is three times as much as the property is worth."

"Oh, really, Tim! Stop pulling my leg."

"Anyway, you've got to back me up."

"Is this another of your famous hunches? You haven't told me yet what inspired you to go to Netherton Fivefields church the other night. So far as I remember, I was just bidden to do as I was told and ask no questions. I've become a bond-woman, a cypher, an idiot-child in the home, and it's about time that . . ."

"You say your prayers and go to bed!"

"Not until you've told me about the church."

"Well, off and on, I've done a lot of thinking about that queer procession Waltruda organized."

"Oh, the black and white one. It made me feel thoroughly nervous."

"I think it shook Ryanston, too, especially when she embraced his boots and called him the Devil. Well, there was always some sort of cock-eyed logic in the things she did and said, and it occurred to me that if one of the family had done for Erik it was likely enough that they'd have interred him near the church and that she knew all about it and liked to circumnavigate his grave."

"When did you think that one out?"

"Not until after Waltruda's death. I was going over the various events in my mind and as soon as I placed them in a

certain order they began to make a pattern.”

“Much study of architecture . . .”

“Has made me mad? Quite the reverse, for architecture of all the arts and sciences is the most orderly, the most logical, the most satisfying. For detail, for sheer precision, for perfection of functional beauty . . .”

“Please explain the pattern you were talking about.”

“You don’t explain a pattern. You can’t. I will attempt to describe it, if you like. Here it is, then: we go to Fivefield Hall and inadvertently overhear the Erik Litany. We go again and Waltruda tells us that her dog is dead. It wasn’t then, but it is now. Later, it is agreed that Ryanston shall be allowed to rent certain locations on the Fivefield estate, with the possible option of also renting the house itself. Subsequently, all this is swept aside, all permissions rescinded, everything washed up and ended.”

“Yes. They changed their minds, but they told you the reason.”

“Let me go on a bit. While all this is pending, we are given the location of Castell Foel.”

“*Before* they’d changed their minds.”

“Exactly. Then Jennifer disappears from school.”

“That doesn’t seem to fit any pattern, so far as I can see.”

“I agree. Nevertheless, she’s a member of the clan, so she *must* fit in somewhere.”

“Unless she starts another and a completely different pattern.”

“Castell Foel is her home, don’t forget. Well, now, I go snooping round on my own and I spot three unlikely things at the castle. First I see that the bricks which covered part of the south side of the tower have been removed; then I spot two people loading a suspiciously coffin-like box on to a Land-Rover; lastly I see a skeleton lying spread out on the kitchen floor of what, at the time, turned out to be an empty house. Oh, and there was something else I noticed at the

time, but it need not have any significance. I noticed, at the side of the house where I saw the two pickaxes, that the bracken had been heavily trampled.”

“Yes? Well, we’ve always thought the bricks were removed so that something could be taken out of the tower. I took it for granted that it was the skeleton and that they wanted to move it before Phisbe took over and began the repairs to the fabric.”

“Yes, that seemed pretty obvious, except that it couldn’t have been true. They couldn’t have worried about the skeleton much, or they’d never have left it where anybody who happened to glance in at the kitchen window couldn’t avoid seeing it. I argued that way before, if you remember. What I now think—this, of course, is hindsight and I didn’t tumble to it until yesterday when the police found those remains—but what I think is that the Purlieus had bricked up Erik’s body in the tower and that they used what had been the skeleton’s iron box to transport his remains to Netherton Fivefields church. What do you think of that theory?”

“Well!” said Alison. “This really *is* a bedtime story with a vengeance! Do you mean that Erik was killed at Castell Foel, then, and not by one of the three sisters? I thought—I mean, weren’t you certain he’d been killed at Fivefield Hall?”

“Yes, to questions one and three. As for question two, yes, I still think he was killed by one of the sisters, but I think he was killed by the youngest, the one I called Alfreda.”

“But she was his wife! She’s Jennifer’s mother!”

“For which reason the Purlieus hushed up what had happened. You mentioned vengeance just a moment ago. I think that’s exactly what it was. Erik divorced her—it was that way round—and she killed him. The Purlieus, for the child’s sake, took no action except to brick up the body and insist that the woman should leave the country. Nobody else lives anywhere near Castell Foel, you see, so nobody would

have been any the wiser, so long as the Purlieus kept their mouths shut.”

“So Erik can’t have been dead all that long?”

“No. He must have been killed *after* the Purlieus bought Castell Foel from the Leigh-Fifields. It must have happened after Jennifer was sent away to boarding-school and, of course, knew only about the divorce, nothing more.”

“And Annabel found out—oh, yes, your pattern is working out all right—and, in a state of shock, she went and told Jennifer about the body being taken from Castell Foel to Netherton Fivefields. But, if that was so, surely Annabel would never have arranged for Jennifer to go to Paris to a woman who’d committed murder?”

“I’m not absolutely sure that Annabel knew about the murder, but she probably thought that the Purlieus were ghouls for dumping the body on the people at Fivefield Hall and that Jennifer would be better off out of their keeping. But, look, all this is speculation, and it’s well past midnight.”

Not until long after Timothy had gone to sleep did Alison realize that he had not fully explained what strange presentiment had taken him to Netherton Fivefields church on the previous night. In the morning, as they were dressing, she said,

“Was your hunch just a hunch, or had you anything to go on?”

“Which time?”

“The night before last, when we met Wulfilda and Annabel at the church.”

“Oh, it was something Ordulf said when I was talking to him after the inquest, I think, but what it was I can’t for the life of me remember.”

“So long as it wasn’t second sight or something!”

“It was Ordulf I expected to find at the church, as a matter of fact. The two women were quite a surprise.”

“Only one thing bothers me about last night’s pattern-story. Why should the Purlieus have gone to all the trouble

of taking down that brickwork and moving the body to Netherton Fivefields? Why not just have said they wouldn't let or sell the castle to Phisbe or to us?"

"Money. They needed the money. They were desperate to sell."

"What about Jennifer's fortune? Surely they had some claim on her, after looking after her and giving her an education and a home?"

"I expect her lawyers paid for her education, you know, and, of course, once she married, I suppose that would be the end of their expectations from her."

"Yes, I see. You won't have to appear at the inquest on Erik, will you?"

"Oh, no, I'm sure I won't. I didn't actually find him. Besides, the body won't be identified, if the family have any sense. No names, no pack-drill. Now, as soon as breakfast is over, I'm going to ring up Purlieu and ask him for the name and address of his lawyers, and then I'm going to ring them up and get from them the address of the Leigh-Fifields. They're sure to have it, because of the conveyance of the Castell Foel estate."

"Won't Mr. Purlieu himself be in touch with the Leigh-Fifields?"

"Yes, but I prefer circumlocution when I'm dealing with slippery customers." He did his telephoning and came back to report to Miss Pomfret-Brown that he and Alison were going to Norwich.

"It's a long way from here," said Miss Pomfret-Brown.

"About two hundred and sixty miles by the nearest route, but only about a hundred and fifty from home, so I think we'll go home first, if only for me to pack a clean shirt. We can hardly turn up at an hotel without any luggage. If, meanwhile, you get any news of Jennifer Purlieu, perhaps you'd telephone as soon as I let you know where we are staying, and, *vice versa*, I'll telephone *you*."

"Oh, you're hopin' for news of Jennifer, are yer?"

"Not really hoping. Just exploring all avenues."

"I see. Wish yer luck. You'll stay here for lunch, of course. Give you plenty of time to get home in daylight, if you leave about two, won't it?"

"Oh, yes. We'll be home for tea, I shouldn't wonder."

"I'd rather only be in time for dinner, and arrive in one piece," said Alison.

"Did you have any trouble in getting the address in Norwich?" asked Alison, as they began their homeward journey.

"Not the slightest. I explained that I was prepared to buy Castell Foel, and mentioned that I had been told that Leigh-Fifield was the name of the previous owner. The lawyers gave me his address, but—here comes the funny part—warned me that he would be most unlikely to sell."

"But he *has* sold—to the Purlieus."

"Well, I'd got what I wanted, so I didn't go into that. Possibly the clerk I spoke to knew nothing about it. There are several partners, I expect, and it's more than likely the left hand knoweth not what the right hand doeth. Now, look, we've got this journey tonight to get home, and, as Sabrina pointed out, Norwich is a damned long way, so would you rather I went there on my own tomorrow? It's a bit of a drag for an interview which will probably only last a quarter of an hour or so."

"I think you need company on a long journey. Besides, I know Jennifer Purlieu and you don't. I'd like to go with you, please."

The Leigh-Fifields lived in a Georgian house in Colegate. The fine doorway had fluted Ionic pillars and four stone steps led up to the panelled door. This was enclosed by a carved archway which had a keystone in the form of a serpent-wreathed head of Medusa.

Timothy presented Phisbe's official card and they were shown into a white-painted, well-proportioned room in which were a thin woman with tired eyes and a handsome, grey-

haired man. Greetings were exchanged, the visitors were seated, and then the man said,

"Your telephone message rather astonished me. Do you mean that my cousin—well, many times removed, but we are distantly related . . ."

"Agreed to sell Castell Foel to me? Certainly."

"But this is incredible! He is only a tenant. He is certainly in no position to accept an offer for the property. I hold the deeds. I can't imagine what on earth he was thinking about!"

"Well," said Timothy, "of course I was quite under the impression that Castell Foel belonged to him."

"That is quite erroneous. Really, the man is either a rogue or insane!"

"He even unbricked the tower so that we might have easier access to it," said Timothy, seizing what he thought might be an opportunity to obtain some light on Purlieu's strange activities.

"Unbricked the tower? You mean he had bricked up that hole in the south wall of the keep?"

"Well, it was bricked up when I first went to Castell Foel, and then someone removed the bricks with pickaxes."

"I don't understand this at all. When I left the castle, it was a picturesque ruin in the grounds. At some time or other—before my time, of course—I imagine some vandals must have pillaged stone from the outside staircase and left a gaping hole. I never thought of having it repaired and, if I had, I certainly shouldn't have used bricks. The thing must have been a perfect eyesore. But that Purlieu should have thought of selling! I simply cannot understand it. Of course, the Purlieus are shockingly hard up, I believe. He's already in arrears to me for the rent of Foel, as a matter of fact, but he says his fortunes will change when his granddaughter comes into her money."

"Oh, yes, the granddaughter," said Timothy, quick to seize upon an opening he had hardly expected to be given.

"As it happens, we are acquainted with the headmistress of her school. We were asked to judge the drama festival in which I believe this girl was to have taken part. They are naturally very anxious to trace her, since the school, I presume, will be held responsible."

"You've met the Purlieus, of course. Do you know the girl?"

This seemed to Timothy a question which was put for a specific purpose, and he dared not give Alison a signal, even by a glance, to beg her not to answer it for him. Apparently she read his mind, for she said nothing, and Timothy replied:

"No. I understood from the headmistress that the girl—Jennifer I think the name was—should have taken part in one of the plays, but, of course, she had run away, so we didn't see her."

"I suppose the Purlieus are anxious, too, unless they think she's gone to join her mother."

"Her mother?" said Timothy innocently. "Oh, she has a mother living, then?"

"Yes, in Paris. There was a family *contretemps*, I believe, and it was thought better that she should reside abroad."

"Oh, yes? Well, Mr. Leigh-Fifield, I mustn't take up any more of your time. I shall look forward to hearing from your lawyers. You have my official card."

"Yes, but I'm sure I don't want to sell."

"My Society will be rather disappointed to hear that. Still, perhaps you will change your mind."

"I hardly think so. By the way, Purlieu seems a sly sort of fellow. He may possibly ask you for a deposit. Do not give him a penny. Tell him to produce the title-deeds, which, of course, he can't possibly do."

"My Society is quite canny, I assure you. We should not allow ourselves to be—conned is the word, I believe."

"Well, good-bye, then, Mr. Herring. Good-bye, Mrs. Herring. I am very glad I know what Purlieu has been up to."

So glad you called. My dear, I think I heard the boys come in. Have you any children, Mr. Herring?"

"No," said Timothy. "That is to say, not yet."

"I should love to meet yours," said Alison, speaking suddenly as she heard voices coming from the hall. The door opened and two youths entered. One was thick-set, dark-haired, and heavy-featured, with a pleasantly bulldog expression on his blunt, good-natured face. The other was slender and fair, with closely cropped hair. He started back at sight of the visitors, and gave a strange little girlish cry.

"Hullo, Jennifer," said Alison. "How did you leave your mother? Quite well, I hope?"

"You recognized her at once, then," said Timothy, after they had dined and were in their hotel bedroom.

"I saw that *she* recognized *me*, and then I knew who she was. After all, it's less than two years since I was on the school staff, and, anyway, I saw Jennifer once with very short hair when she was Lord Mountararat in Gilbert and Sullivan."

"Nice-looking kid."

"Yes. Oh, well, we know a little more about her disappearance than we did, and we know who the boy was who went to Paris. Have you let P.-B. know she's found and that she's going to be married?"

"Telephoned her while you were having your breakfast in bed. There's one thing: Sabrina will hardly expect to get her to go back to school."

"It was good of that boy to go over to Paris to get the mother's permission for the marriage, because they could have pleased themselves, once Jennifer was eighteen."

"Yes, but she isn't eighteen. That's why she had to hide from the Purlieus, her legal guardians."

"Still, Annabel is dismissed without a stain on her character!"

"Yes. I expect, bored to death as she was at Netherton Fivefields, she quite enjoyed the cloak-and-dagger aspect.

You know, the youth not liking to send his proposal of marriage direct to the school, but sending it to Annabel to pass on, must have pleased her, but Annabel, to amuse and titillate her mischievous self—you said she was a tike—added on a few lurid observations to make sure her cousin really did take flight from school and take refuge with her new family, and there we have it, plus a few lies about getting Jennifer over to France.”

“You’d think Jennifer would have let the Purlieus know she was safe even if she was hiding from them.”

“My darling girl, the Purlieus, so far as I can see, couldn’t care less about the kid. That was perfectly obvious. Of course, Sabrina will have to let the police know they can call off the search. I doubt whether they’ll be too terribly pleased at the waste of time and money.”

“Do you remember you once accused me of using meiosis?”

“Oh, did I? What about it?”

“Only that one of Mr. Leigh-Fifield’s remarks struck me as being pitched in a pretty low key.”

“I know the one you mean. He said that Mrs. Purlieu—the young one, Jennifer’s mother—went to live abroad because there had been a family *contretemps*.”

“Yes. It seemed a very off-beat way of putting it, if he was referring to a murder.”

“What are you trying to suggest?”

“Well, look, supposing the *contretemps* wasn’t a murder at all? Suppose it was just an illegitimate baby?”

“Meaning it was Jennifer?”

“Yes.”

“And the puritanical and unsympathetic Purlieus said to their daughter, ‘Right! We’ll bring up the kid if you’ll get yourself out of the country and stay out.’ Is that what you mean?”

“I could go a bit further. Suppose the man—the father—was in the sort of position where the slightest suggestion of

an improper relationship could ruin his career? Suppose he said: 'I'm prepared to settle a fortune in trust for the brat, to be paid her as soon as she comes of age, provided that none of you, by word or deed, ever lets it out that she's my child.'"

"Darling, you should write sensational fiction!"

"All right, perhaps I'll try one day. You see one implication of all this, though, don't you?"

"I do, and you shan't rob me!"

"Of Erik? I'll have to, if I'm right about all this. Erik and Erik's murder disappear from the scene. They are phantasmagoria. There never wasn't no such animals."

"Of course," said Timothy, "I'm not saying your explanation won't hold water. None of the family, neither the Purlieus nor the Fivefield Hall lot, have ever had any money, so Jennifer's fortune couldn't come from them."

"It would lend colour to the rumour that the mother might kidnap the girl before she came of age, and if I'm right, and Jennifer's mother is the Purlieus' daughter, that would account for the surname."

"Yes, all the same, I can't bear to give up Erik. He's necessary, therefore he must exist, either in the flesh or out of it. Besides, there's that body at Netherton Fivefields church. If that isn't Erik, who is it?"

"If the police can't get it identified, I don't suppose we shall ever know."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Dawn Over Lethe

“. . . men, and not Angels; and then men *Ad distinctionem mortuorum*, saith Chrysostome . . .”

John Donne—*Sermon 4, Preached to the Nobility*

“Of course there was no such person as Erik,” said Miss Wulfilda. “I should have thought, Mr. Herring, that a man of your intelligence would have realized that. He was a sick fancy indulged in by my poor sister and we all gave way to it. She was extremely difficult to live with but, of course, we could not endure, for the sake of the family pride, that she should leave us and be sent to live among strangers who might not even have been kind to her.”

“But the bust,” said Timothy.

“Fabricated for us by Monica Purlieu—*not*, in my opinion, a woman blessed with artistic gifts. However, it pleased poor Waltruda and she became far less eccentric after it was brought into the house.”

“And the curious Latin service?”

“All part of the innocent deception. I insisted, however, when Ordulf put together the verses, that there should be no blasphemy. I mean, by that, I would not tolerate any breaking of the third commandment. By the way, now that we are done, for the time being, with the police and their

unnecessary and irksome enquiries, and you have relieved us of our chance of receiving the money from Waltruda's life assurance . . ."

"I'm terribly sorry about that," said Timothy, "and I may be able to do something to put it right."

"There will be no necessity for you to interest yourself further in our concerns, and I beg that you will not attempt to do so. I have come to an equitable arrangement with Mr. Ryanston, for, now that Waltruda is no longer here to object, there is no reason why he should not film the ruined church if he still wishes to do so, and it seems that he does."

"We had to find another mansion for him when it seemed it wouldn't be possible for him to use Fivefield Hall, you know, but I believe he has arrived at a solution."

"He has." Wulfilda's grim face relaxed a little of its stern and forbidding expression. "Mr. Ryanston has been extremely generous. This house has been so much altered and added to by various members of the Leigh family and its collaterals during the past four centuries that he proposes to use it in quite a number of his films, so that Annabel will have an assured income for the next two or three years."

Timothy, who had been in touch with Ryanston and had heavily subsidised this arrangement which, although she did not say so, included Miss Wulfilda in its provisions, nodded and observed:

"So you will be vacating Fivefield Hall for a time."

"No thanks to you, Mr. Herring," retorted Wulfilda with venom and inaccurately. "For the time being I shall reside as a paying guest with the Leigh-Fifiolds in Norwich. They have plenty of room now that their son is married. I also hope to visit Paris. One lives in an enlightened and permissive age, and bygones must be bygones and family solidarity preserved. Ordulf and Annabel have gone to Tripoli and will be absent from this country for some time. What Annabel will do when she returns must remain, for the nonce,

undecided. She will please herself, no doubt. She was always wilful. Ordulf is an old man, and provision may have to be made for his future. However, he is unlikely to live much longer, I imagine."

"“They have numbered all my bones and I am poured out like water,”” quoted Timothy. Miss Wulfilda, looking startled, exclaimed,

"Really, Mr. Herring! It is quite unnecessary to remind me of that travesty of an act of worship! Erik is a figment, a miasma, a disorder of the spirit, and must now be consigned to limbo."

"No, to Lethe; to the waters of forgetfulness," said Timothy. He thought it significant that Waltruda had buried the iron box on top of the human remains which the sergeant had disinterred.

"Was it a sticky interview?" asked Alison sympathetically, when Timothy had returned to his Cotswold home. "I thought it was rather heroic of you to go."

"The pathetic old dear was very *grande dame*, of course, but after having been the means of chiselling her out of several thousand pounds' insurance money, I felt the least I could do was stick my neck out and let her take a chop at it."

"You couldn't have known, could you, about the life insurance on Waltruda?"

"No. The hell of it, though, when everything came to light, was that Wulfilda must have deprived himself of necessities to find the money to pay the premiums, and she did it so that Waltruda should be provided for if anything happened to Wulfilda. There was a reciprocal arrangement, of course, so that, in the event of Waltruda's going first, the money reverted to Wulfilda, but, owing to my meddling, the poor gallant old thing has been done clean out of it."

"You've never told me how you managed to convince the police that nobody had a case to answer in connection with Waltruda's death. How did you know it was suicide?"

"I didn't, but I could tell that the doctor at the inquest wasn't satisfied and neither was I. You only had to look at Wulfilda and Ordulf to realize that they hadn't the strength, let alone the bloody-mindedness, necessary to do the strangling job the way it had been done, even if Annabel had helped. I had a word with a chap I know who is an expert in forensic medicine and put it up to him and told him my conclusions. He had a word with the doctor who'd given evidence, and they went into the thing. What she must have done was to wait until the other three had gone over to Castell Foel that third time and frightened the servant into leaving the house. Then she did for herself."

"But why?"

"I think the death of her dog was the last straw, you know. Up to that time she'd been extremely eccentric, but nothing more. However, when the dog, which accompanied her and the others on the first visit to Castell Foel, picked up some poison which I suppose had been put down for rats, its death sent her over the border. I suppose they buried the poor beast first at Foel and brought Waltruda home, but I think she must have brooded over its death. In the end, in that empty house, being left alone, she opened the lid of the priest's hole, fastened one end of the dog's lead round her neck and the other to a leg of that immovable Elizabethan table, and just simply fell into the hole. She was a big, clumsy, heavy woman, you know, and that hole is pretty deep. When I looked in I couldn't see the bottom of it, and whatever stairs it might once have had were gone."

"And when the others came home?"

"Thanked their lucky stars the servant had hopped it, I should think. They probably cut away the leather thong from the leg of the table, closed the hole and then began to realize what a spot they were in. If they reported a suicide,

bang went the insurance money. If they said nowt about it and didn't produce the body, they couldn't claim the cash either. My bet is that they were still debating what to do when I went and bunged a spanner into the works. Remember when I went there with Sabrina that day and rang up the rozzers?"

"I still don't understand about the dog and the bust of Erik and the iron box."

"Well, mind you, this is only a reconstruction, but, so far as I can see, it fits the facts. Waltruda, at the end of her tether when the dog died on their first visit, must have demanded that the remains be brought home and buried near the church. I expect she created such hell about it on the second visit that the Purlieus were persuaded (or threatened—after all, it was on their land that the creature had picked up the poison) to bring the dog over to Netherton Fivefields and inter it in the garden from where, later on, she dug it up and took it—heaven knows how—to the church."

"*And* the bust of Erik? What about that?"

"Apart from the fact, reported by Wulfilda, that the bust was fabricated by Mrs. Purlieu . . ."

"So she *was* an artist?"

"If you like to speak loosely, I suppose you could put it like that. Apart from this genesis of the bust, it seems that Waltruda had a fixation on somebody she called Erik, although I am assured by Miss Wulfilda that no such person existed. I suppose, when the dog died, Waltruda wanted both her idols interred in the same box, that's all. She must have demanded, as I said, that the dead dog be returned to her by the Purlieus and, approached and probably threatened by Wulfilda, who's a bit of an old battleaxe, as we know, I imagine they turfed Mrs. Purlieu's anatomical specimen out of the iron box in which she kept it, left it on the kitchen floor in their hurry, took the box and inserted

Boris, and had me worried when I saw them load it on to the Land-Rover."

"And then you saw the pickaxes and the skeleton! What a morning for you!"

"Yes, take it all in all, I suppose it was, especially coming on top of young Jennifer's disappearance. Well, Waltruda may have got Ordulf to help her bury the box in the prehistoric mound by Netherton Fivefields church, and it was done to pacify her, but I suppose, to Wulfilda, with her upright and orthodox notions, it was sacrilege, just the same."

"Not because it was buried on a prehistoric sacred site, surely?"

"No, but because she regarded the banking as forming part of the churchyard, and therefore consecrated ground."

"Yes, but what about the body which the police found underneath the iron box?"

"I haven't an explanation, and neither have they, so far. In any case, as I said, I don't believe they'll ever get it identified, thorough though their methods are. My lawyers, incidentally, are having an awful job to convince them that Ordulf and Wulfilda aren't guilty of concealing Waltruda's death, but I think we'll get that quashed on the grounds that they lacked actual intention."

"Do you remember how lightly we made those bets about what Mr. Ryanston would be like?"

"Yes. He wasn't much help in deciding them for us, was he?" said Timothy, glad of a change of subject.

"Sometimes I've wondered," said Alison, "whether Waltruda was right, after all."

"How do you mean? About Ryanston?"

"That he really *is* the Devil."

"You're not yourself, my love. Let me put you to bed."

"Are you going ahead with the repairs to Castell Foel?"

"No. The Purlieus have paid their arrears—I think Jennifer gave them the money—and are going to stay there. In any case, Leigh-Fifield isn't prepared to sell, so we're throwing in our hand. Do you mind very much?"

"No, I'm glad. The place gives me the creeps, and as for Netherton Fivefields, I never want to see that church or the house again."

"That's fine, so, where Phisbe is concerned, 'tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new,' and let's hope all our worries are over."

"It's all right for us, I know, but have we really any right to be cheerful and carefree and happy?"

"Well, I can't see any point in nursing a guilt-complex just because we don't, at the moment, happen to be governed by the princes of the darkness of this world."

"I'm sorry, but at the moment I feel morbid and depressed."

"Don't indulge yourself with feelings which will be much more appropriate, doubtless, later on, when our troubles *really* begin."

"You don't think those grimly prophetic words will cheer me up, I hope?"

"They were not intended to cheer you up. They were meant as a stern and husbandly rebuke." He held her at arms' length and studied her. "'Is this the face that launched a thousand ships, and burned the topless towers of Ilium?' Think of Mrs. Schnellenhamer, my love, and be thankful you haven't the Duke of Wigan and a hundred and fifty guests all coming to dinner tomorrow. That'd make you think a bit, wouldn't it?"

"But I should never have invited them in the first place. Anyway, I wish we hadn't scrapped those idiotic bets. They were rather fun."

"All right. Let's agree they're still on."

"And?"

"Oh, Sigismund Glutz wins. Allow me to present you with the equivalent of twenty-five N.P."

"I'd rather have had two half-crowns. I was very sad when they did away with our noblest and most aristocratic coin."

"Alas, yes! It reminds me of a prophecy by Henry King.

"By thy clear sun
My love and fortune both did run;
But thou wilt never more appear
Folded within my hemisphere.'"

"When I was ten my father handed me a half-crown for blacking a bigger boy's eye."

"Did you mean to?"

"Lord, no! I was in the most fearful funk. I bribed the boy with a bob to stop him renewing the battle."

"And did he renew it?"

"No. I have always associated with gentlemen."

About the Author



Gladys Mitchell was born in the village of Cowley, Oxford, in April 1901. She was educated at the Rothschild School in Brentford, the Green School in Isleworth, and at Goldsmiths and University Colleges in London. For many years Miss Mitchell taught history and English, swimming, and games. She retired from this work in 1950 but became so bored without the constant stimulus and irritation of teaching that she accepted a post at the Matthew Arnold School in Staines, where she taught English and history, wrote the annual school play, and coached hurdling. She was a member of the Detection Club, the PEN, the Middlesex Education Society, and the British Olympic Association. Her

father's family are Scots, and a Scottish influence has appeared in some of her books.